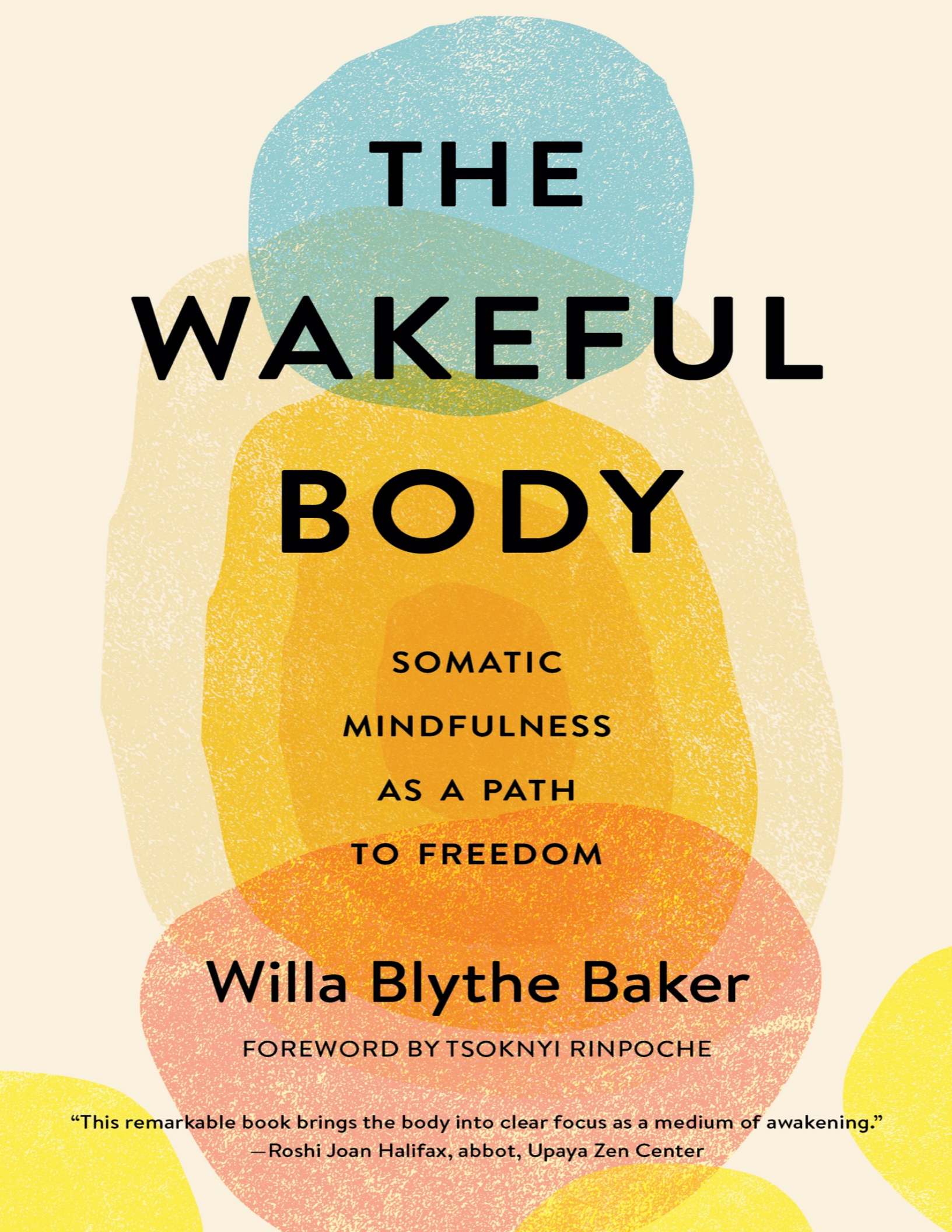




THE WAKEFUL BODY

SOMATIC
MINDFULNESS
AS A PATH
TO FREEDOM

Willa Blythe Baker

FOREWORD BY TSOKNYI RINPOCHE

“This remarkable book brings the body into clear focus as a medium of awakening.”
—Roshi Joan Halifax, abbot, Upaya Zen Center



Praise for *The Wakeful Body*

“*The Wakeful Body* is a gift to the world and cements Willa Blythe Baker as one of our strongest and most convincing voices of a deeply somatic approach to Buddhist practice. Baker persuasively theorizes that meditation is misconceived as something we do with our mind. Far more profitable is an exploration of bodily experience, and this shift in focus from mind to body changes everything for the aspiring meditator. Filled with anecdotes from her life, we follow her journey of awakening as she enters as a young novice on the path and emerges as one of the most important teachers of our time.”

—Will Johnson, author of *The Posture of Meditation* and *Breathing through the Whole Body*

“The human body is a sacred form full of potential. This book lays out rich and practical guidance to utilize it as a doorway to healing and spiritual awakening.”

—Anam Thubten, author of *Choosing Compassion*

“A beautifully written expression of devotion to the body as teacher—wherein one can clearly feel the depth and authenticity of the author’s exploration and practice.”

—Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel, author of *The Logic of Faith*

THE WAKEFUL BODY

Somatic Mindfulness as
a Path to Freedom

Willa Blythe Baker

Foreword by Tsoknyi Rinpoche



SHAMBHALA

Shambhala Publications, Inc.
2129 13th Street
Boulder, Colorado 80302
www.shambhala.com

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Cover art and design: Kimberly Glyder
Interior design: Greta D. Sibley

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Shambhala Publications is distributed worldwide by Penguin Random House, Inc., and its subsidiaries.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Baker, Willa Blythe, author.

Title: The wakeful body: somatic mindfulness as a path to freedom / Willa Blythe Baker.

Description: First edition. | Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021011364 | ISBN 9781611808742 (trade paperback)

eISBN 9780834844087

Subjects: LCSH: Meditation. | Mind and body. | Mindfulness (Psychology) | Awareness. | Human body—Religious aspects.

Classification: LCC BL627.B3425 2021 | DDC 294.3/4435—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021011364>

a_prh_5.8.0_c0_r0

Holy places, shrines and alters;
I've been all over in my travels.
But never have I seen a place of pilgrimage
more blissful than the body

—Saraha, *Dohakośa*

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Foreword

AROUND 2009, AFTER having taught Dzogchen in the West for over eighteen years, I noticed that students who came to retreats were very bright and attentive, but something important seemed to be missing. That was a felt sense of being in the body—a groundedness essential for transformation and a foundation for more advanced dharma practices. Our culture’s speediness, stress, and cognitive demands often move in the opposite direction of deep relaxation, calmness, and just merely being.

When my friend and student for many years, Lama Willa, asked if I would write a foreword to *The Wakeful Body*, I immediately said “yes.” Then I reflected on why I said “yes” so quickly. I became aware over the years that she had an exceptionally well-trained mind with extensive study in Buddhism, that she had completed two three-year retreats, was proficient in both oral and written Tibetan, had founded a dharma center in New Hampshire, and was ordained as a Buddhist nun for twelve years.

But my “yes” was perhaps more related to the teachers we share, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and my father, Tulku Orgyen, among others. She describes how it felt to meet her teachers so beautifully: “They don’t just aspire to kindness. They radiate it. They have dissolved some of the barriers between head and heart, between the wish for goodness and goodness itself.” Maybe my “yes” was because we share the experience and good fortune of meeting masters with this type of rare kindness that is so precious and important for our world.

While in her second three-year retreat, through her suffering and searching, she rediscovered the truth of her body like an old friend, a fertile and alive “landscape of feeling.” She began to cut through the culturally conditioned concepts she had of her body, allowing more direct, vital, and

unfiltered experiences. She had moved from a more transcendent “up” to “waking down.”

This book has a natural, almost familiar feel because it comes out of her lived experience and her ability to weave stories, poetry, striking images, and helpful insights into a lovely mandala for us to enter. At the same time, Lama Willa provides a clear path, a rich practice that dharma students at all levels can use on a daily basis or retreat. In a very practical way, she leads us through what she calls “layers of embodiment,” the seamless interdependence of our bodies, energy body, and minds so we can open to the mystery of our own lives.

—*Tsoknyi Rinpoche, author of*

How Mindfulness Works and Open Heart, Open Mind

Acknowledgments

MY HEART IS full of gratitude to my Buddhist teachers past and present, without whom this book could not have been written. I would like to extend special thanks to my readers Jane Burdick, Elizabeth Monson, Wendy Hasencamp, and Bryn Dawson for their helpful comments and suggestions. I also would like to thank Liz Shaw, my editor at Shambhala, for her support and encouragement.

Prologue

MY MOTHER USED to tell a story of a time when I was three years old. We were walking across the campus of UC Berkeley, where my mother worked. At Sather Gate, we encountered a group of Hare Krishnas—with their long peach robes and shaved heads—dancing and singing. A mridanga drum and small cymbals kept time.

As my mother told it, I broke away, and before she knew what was happening, her baby was in the middle of a throng of whirling dancers, hips swaying, hands waving, laughing. My mother was anxious but amused. The devotees handed me a couple of tiny cymbals. This moment captures how I often felt in my body as a young child: joyful, unselfconscious, spontaneous, and safe.

As young children, we do not think much about the body. Instead, we feel the body as a landscape of sensations and responses. This landscape is enriched by safe and loving physical contact with our caregivers, contact with the natural world, joy in movement, and contact with animals. This landscape is scarred by unsafe physical contact, trauma, and experiences of fear and danger. Every human being carries a mixed feeling history from childhood encoded in the territory of the body.

As we grow up, the landscape of feeling tends to fade into the background as the conceptual self solidifies. As adolescents and young adults, as we are exposed to cultural norms of appearance and embodiment, we begin to think a lot about the body. We compare our body to the norms of our culture and to other bodies. The landscape of feeling is gradually supplemented or sometimes even replaced by a “body” formed by concepts, opinions, and ideas. Some of these concepts might be empowering, even bringing us back to the landscape of feeling. But it is not at all uncommon

for our body concepts to be distorted. These concepts, more often than not, obscure the landscape of feeling.

As a young adult, I experienced such a distortion, and a disruption of it. During my first two years of college, all my ideas about the body proliferated to such an extent as to catalyze a kind of paralysis. Perhaps the extremity of this experience ended up being a kind of assist, because I could not ignore what had happened. At the time, I was attending a small liberal arts college in upstate New York, where most of the women on campus were from the Big City. They dressed fashionably, shaved their legs, and wore makeup. Some of them were skinny—as skinny as corpses.

One of the Big City girls lived on my floor in Raymond, my campus dorm. She was tan, her shoulder-length hair straightened and highlighted, a Gucci clutch dangling from her wrist. When I passed her in the hall, a strange pungent smell lingered in the air behind her. Once in a while I heard her vomiting in the dorm bathroom after dinner.

Being a Berkeley girl with unshaved legs, no makeup, Birks, and wild long brown hair, I felt out of place. Without thinking much about it, I began to dress differently. I cut my long brown hair to shoulder length and permed it. I started shaving my legs. In the dining hall, the portions of food on my plate slowly dwindled. I obsessively counted calories.

A strident voice was becoming audible in my head, seeming to emerge from nowhere. The voice was unforgiving and harsh. It criticized my body, finding fault in everything from my freckles to my eyelashes to my body height. Before I knew it, a cycle of disordered eating and obsessive thinking set in. The thoughts came with an irrational sense of certainty. Ashamed, I kept them to myself.

On the outside, I hung out with the literary crowd and the co-op kids, and still retained most of the cues and habits of my old life. But on the inside, I was under the spell of these uncontrollable thoughts that felt as real as the physical world. My body had gone from being a landscape of feeling, something that I listened to and enjoyed, to a body of self-denigrating concepts. I mourned the loss of the little girl in me, the one who had danced

carefree with the Hare Krishnas. She seemed to be drowning, and I could not understand why.

The disruption of this cycle came unexpectedly with a decision to spend my third year of college abroad in Nepal. On the face of it, this move seemed to have little to do with my misery. It was informed instead by two criteria: I wanted to spend a year in someplace very different, and I wanted to explore Buddhism. But once there, I felt embedded and connected in a way I never had before. Living with a family in Kathmandu, later in a nunnery, and then in an agrarian refugee community at the base of the Annapurna range, I sensed my body as a natural extension of a tightly woven larger whole.

Nepal provided many opportunities for experiential learning that contributed to healing my relationship with my body. Our program director not only permitted us but also encouraged us to dive into the teachings and practices of Buddhism and haṭha yoga. Roaming the back alleys of Boudhanath, dressed in a blue-flowered *chuba* and my beat-up Reeboks, I discovered a warren-like network of monasteries where teachings were held on the weekends, sometimes with an English interpreter present. The teachings explored consciousness, the deeper causes of human suffering, and the meaning of freedom. They were informed by a very particular type of Buddhism practiced in the Himalayas, one that had for centuries melded yogic energy practices with mental disciplines of meditation.

At the same time, on Tuesdays at sunrise on a rooftop in Kathmandu, I took my very first haṭha yoga classes with a young yogi from southern India named Chandra. These classes were informed by ancient yogic disciplines of the Upanishads. Chandra had shiny black hair that hung to his waist and a gleaming wide smile. Standing with my hands at my heart, watching the golden sun peak over the high Himalayan mountains, I listened as our teacher invited us into a new body, one that paid homage to the miracle of life. One that had dignity, joy, and meaning. I once again connected to my body as a landscape of feeling.

This combination of teachings and practices—those of the mind and those of the body—shifted something inside me. I felt my heart open to a

more tender and compassionate space. During the first few months in Nepal, the words *coming home* often echoed in my mind. I felt myself descending into a kind of earthiness that helped my body relax and heal, even while occasionally racked with dysentery or giardia. This much I knew. What I did not know is that this year abroad would set me on a winding path that would eventually lead to monastic ordination, long retreat, and a life of teaching.

In time, my exploration of Buddhism would help me understand that the body holds the key to mindfulness. Over the next three decades, my spiritual path would travel away from the body, and back to the body. As I came home to the body, the teachings of Buddhism helped me discern between the body of concepts and the body of feeling, and they would show me how to work with both. This book is an expression of where I have landed, and it reflects how I currently teach meditation and mindfulness. I have come to believe that an authentic human path of spirituality inevitably winds back to the body. There, and only there, will awakening occur.

Introduction

Great wisdom lives in the body.

—*Hevajra Tantra*

AFTER THE BUDDHA'S enlightenment, the story goes, someone asked him to summarize what he had experienced. He replied with one word: *bodhi*, or “wakefulness.” This is a powerful metaphor for what we are doing on a path of meditation: awakening from the sleep of unawareness into the wakefulness of awareness.

When I first started meditating, I did not think I was on a path to wakefulness. I thought the goal of my practice was transcendence. Bodhi was a leap into a new state of being, one that was less encumbered than whatever state I was in. I remember anticipating something like this during my first weekend retreat at Ring of Bone Zendo in Grass Valley, California. I was fifteen at the time, tagging along with my father who had recently taken a shine to Zen Buddhism.

Sitting motionless alongside twenty other retreatants in a small Japanese-style temple under a canopy of soaring conifers, feeling the swish of the roshi's stick at my back, I had a sense that I should be reaching for something. Perhaps an out-of-body experience, or a leap out of the confusion of my struggling mind. I nurtured a sense of anticipation, a sense that at any moment I might somehow miraculously wake *up* and transcend the moment I was in, beyond the dappled golden light dancing on the floor, beyond the crisp birdsong filling the air.

After many years of working with students, I now think that many of us are doing something like this. We are trying to extend beyond what is happening now. We are hoping to leave the ordinary behind. Enlightenment, we imagine, must be better than whatever is here now.

Sometimes we are trying to wake *up* in the sense of moving vertically into the headspace. Would that be any surprise given we are taught from a young age that our thinking mind will solve our problems? Such subtle beliefs follow us to the meditation seat, resulting in, for example, attempts to think our way to a state of peacefulness. But when we move vertically into the headspace, we tend to lose the thread of our present-moment experience.

For many years, I think I was doing a lot of this—trying to wake up.

As I learned and practiced yogic Buddhism, however, I noticed that these teachings were asking me to do something different. The Buddhism I encountered in Nepal takes the perspective that the body is a sacred mandala, a naturally pure universe. In other words, the body is naturally awake, in touch with the vividness and feeling of moment-by-moment experience. The body dwells in the here and now. But we are not always in alignment with the body's natural wakefulness. So we train in meditation and yoga to gradually align with the body's inherent bodhi.

As I began to discover these dimensions of the Buddhist tradition, I noticed that instead of transporting me vertically up into the headspace, these teachings were calling me down into my body. Instead of encouraging me to transcend or escape my current state—whatever it might be—I was being invited down into it, so to speak.

This is why, over time, I have come to think of the yogic Buddhist path not as a path of waking up but as a path of “waking down.” Waking down does not mean just shifting attention to the area below your neck. It means exploring the wisdom of your embodied experience, from the physical to the sensory, from the sensory to the emotional, from the emotional to the energetic, from the energetic to the conscious. It is about exploring the sacred world of feeling, breath, and sensation that is already present.

I think of meditation as a path of waking down for another reason too. We can spend many years meditating and gathering profound insights. We can be inspired by noble ideas and aspirations. These insights, ideas, and aspirations might be powerful, but they can also remain locked in a conceptual box. If truths that we know with the conceptual mind or that we glimpse with intuition do not make it down into the body and nervous system, we will not really live them.

The path of waking down does not transcend. It metabolizes. You don't need to leave anything behind. In fact, you cannot leave anything behind, because your humanness is a part of you. Rather, on the path of waking down, what you are experiencing right here and right now is enough. It is more than enough. The here and now is the very stuff of liberation.

Somatic Nonduality

During that pivotal year in Nepal, it did not take me long to notice that the teachings had a lot to say about the mind. The words *mind*, *mind training*, *the nature of mind*, and *mindfulness* were recurring themes, giving me the impression that meditation was primarily about taming and training the mind or expanding consciousness. By default, I assumed the “mind” I was hearing so much about in the Buddhist teachings must be something distinct from the body, given that consciousness seemed to me a far cry from the utilitarian and impermanent flesh.

Cultural conditioning may have played a part in this assumption. An absolute separation between mind and body was first introduced and enshrined by the French philosopher René Descartes, who famously asserted a somatic dualism, that mind and body are inherently and completely separate. His work, which remained influential in America and Europe well into the twentieth century, sparked a debate about the relationship between body and mind that continues today in the fields of philosophy, religion, and the sciences. Is it any surprise that many of us carry a version of this dualism when we come to a contemplative path?

By now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, scientists generally agree it is not possible to isolate the mind from the body in any verifiable way. The cognitive mind is understood to extend all over the body, as the interconnected nervous and endocrine systems. Some schools of thought, such as the research-based philosophical 4E cognition model, propose that cognition even extends into the environment, the world around us. The boundaries between mind and body have broken down in the last several decades to the point where the division is more semantic than actual.

The Buddhism I encountered in Nepal, what I call in this book *yogic Buddhism* (alternatively called by some scholars “tantric Buddhism”), also explicitly addresses the problem of body-mind dualism. In the yogic tradition, distinctions between body, energy, awareness, mind, consciousness, and breath are made, but not for the purposes of absolute separation. Rather, these categories are practical cues for turning attention to feeling and experience, for the purposes of gradually dissolving separation. In other words, Buddhist traditions of meditation and yoga recognize that body-mind dualism is a phenomenon of human perception. But these traditions also aspire to the expansion of human consciousness that takes embodied expression as a gradual experiential dissolution of the divide between body and mind.

Through encountering these teachings, I eventually came to understand that the “mind” my teachers so often referred to in the rustic monasteries of Kathmandu was not something distinct from the body. Rather, mind is embodied, interpenetrating with the physical and energetic dimensions of the living organism that we call the “body.” Once I understood mind as embodied in the Buddhist context, my understanding of the teachings changed and I felt less divided within myself. I began to see that the mentalization of wakefulness is not the same as wakefulness itself.

The map for waking down that I rely on in this book is based on how I folded these yogic teachings into my own practice relying on a schema of the *kāyas* (bodies) as they appear in yogic contexts—especially commentaries on the subtle body. In esoteric sources such as these, the *kāyas* are not exactly distinct “bodies” but rather *layers of embodiment*.

These layers are distinguishable within human experience but not ultimately separable. This book intends to help you explore this yogic theory of layered embodiment experientially by diving down into three layers of embodiment, each deeper and subtler than the last.

They are:

1. The Earth Body: This is the physical layer of embodiment, what we think of as the flesh-and-blood body.
2. The Subtle Body: This is the energetic layer of embodiment—the sense of feeling, sensory experience, and emotion in the body.
3. The Awareness Body: This is the consciousness layer of embodiment—the sense of being aware that pervades the body.

The three parts of this book explore these layers through turning attention to the physical, energetic, and mental dimensions of human experience. By diving deep into your body, you find that you already have what you need. Concentration, wisdom, compassion, kindness, and joy are waiting there.

It may help as you go through this book to keep in mind that even though in theory body and mind are not separable, words such as *mind* and *body*, as well as other categories such as *energy* and *breath*, help name our conventional experience—a subjective sense of a thinking mind, a feeling body, an expansion and contraction of breath, and the flow of energy. The naming helps us do the work of accessing our experience. But ultimately these practices bring us toward what the Zen poet Eisai called “the oneness of the bodymind,” and what Tibetan yogis call “bodymind inseparable.” When body, breath, and mind become integrated through practices of meditation and yoga, the path reaches its fruition.

GROUND

A few years ago, I taught at Harvard Divinity School for several semesters. This school was home to a wonderful and diverse community of multiple religious traditions. I remember having lunch one day with a colleague in the college cafeteria, one of many rich interreligious dialogues I had while there. We were deep in a conversation about our respective traditions.

At one point, she asked, “What do Buddhists believe?”

I found myself speechless. I had to really sit with it, and I was surprised I did not feel I could honestly answer the question. After pausing for a while, even embarrassingly so, I found myself saying, “I believe a lot of things, but I’m not sure any of them matter. For me, as a Buddhist, I feel like the question is not ‘What do I believe?’ but ‘What do I practice?’”

Both meditation and yoga are first and foremost practices. Practices set up a context to find truth through your own experience. That is why there are practice suggestions woven throughout this book. These practices are encouragement for you to explore your own experience.

Here’s the thing: Reading and thinking about meditation and mindfulness are helpful. They can be essential first steps. But reading and thinking alone cannot bring you to stillness or peace. The only way to experience the benefits of meditation or mindfulness is to do it. So, as we go through this journey together, try putting the book down now and then. Close your eyes, pause, breathe. Try the technique out. Savor your experience of the present moment. The practices are also available as audio recordings to help guide you. Visit www.Shambhala.com/WakefulBodyPractices to access them.

It might seem like there are many practices in this book. But in some ways, there is only one: the practice of becoming intimate with your body. In my experience and that of so many people I have worked with over the years, that intimacy leads to deep learning, freedom, and joy. But it is not a quick path. It takes time—weeks, months, years—to “wake down,” because shifts in our psychophysical reality happen gradually. The body brings up things that need to be worked through.

Sometimes I use the acronym GROUND to summarize the journey of becoming intimate with your embodied experience. Becoming intimate with

your embodied experience requires a frequent redirecting of attention away from rumination and toward present-moment sensory and bodily experience. GROUND uses keywords to remind you how to reconnect to a sense of being in your body, on the earth, in the present moment. Using this acronym as a mnemonic allows you to enact the principles of this book on the spot, or in a single short session, returning you to the body and its wisdom while at work or at home, wherever you happen to be.

GROUND stands for

Ground
Relax
Open
Untangle
Nurture
Dissolve

I will not go into great detail unpacking the scope of each of these keywords here because the entire book is designed to do just that. Suffice it to say that practicing GROUND takes us through the three layers of embodiment discussed above. The first two words, **Ground** and **Relax**, connect you to the feeling of the physical body. **Ground** prompts you to sense the heaviness and groundedness of your body, and to remember that this earth is a resource. **Relax** reminds you that the sense of the earth within can help you loosen up and let go.

Open and **Untangle** connect you to your body as a field of energy. When you **open** your senses and become receptive to everything you are feeling, you start to notice that your body is pervaded by a vibrant aliveness. In the yogic teachings, this vibrant aliveness is called the *subtle body*. The subtle body is an energetic layer of feeling that pervades the coarse physicality that we usually associate with the idea of “body.”

The subtle body, as the entire gestalt of your body’s energy, holds your memories and traumas as blockages or knots. **Untangle** is a prompt to

notice, befriend, and clear these blockages, to untangle your energetic knots.

Nurture connects you to consciousness and awareness, the very subtle part of you that is just perceiving, just seeing, just knowing. Awareness is a vivid, clear, radically present knowing that lives through your body. It does not need fixing or enhancing, but it responds well to nurturing. To nurture means to attend to the knower of your experience, an awareness that is simple, clear, nonjudgmental, present, and not separate from what it knows. This is not an “up in your head” awareness but one that saturates your embodied experience.

As you tend or nurture awareness, the boundaries between categories such as body and mind, breath and energy, thought and materiality begin to shimmer. **Dissolve** reminds you to allow the sense of separateness between mind and body to melt into a single taste. This is an encouragement toward a dissolution into embodied wholeness. It helps you perceive your body, breath, energy, and mind as primordially integrated.

Chapters 1 and 2 of this book introduce concepts that are foundational for enacting GROUND, such as somatic mindfulness and the fundamentally experiential nature of the body. Chapters 3 through 8 explore GROUND as a gradual cultivation of somatic mindfulness and embodied self-awareness. The names of these chapters (“Grounding,” “Relaxation,” “Opening,” “Untangling,” “Nurturing,” and “Dissolving”) reflect the mnemonic. See chapter 8 for a detailed practice of GROUND that brings the teachings of this book together for application on the spot in your daily life.

This book is an invitation to become more conscious and aware, as the Buddha awoke from the sleep of unawareness to the light of awareness. We are learning how to attend to what is happening in the body, mind, emotions, and nervous system with kindness and curiosity. If really embraced, this journey could last a lifetime. The body is that deep and interesting.

I have included poetry and verse in this book, at the beginning of each section and at the beginning and end of every chapter. Many, perhaps even most, of the source scriptures of the East are in verse. Historians tell us this

is because premodern cultures were oral cultures in which texts were just not written down. Indigenous wisdom was, before books were written, passed from generation to generation by oral recitation and memorization. This was the case for the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha's disciples memorized his words and passed them down to the next generation of disciples.

But perhaps there are other reasons that poetry has long been popular with mystics. While prose is the language of the mind, poetry is the language of the body. Poetry is often metered, and metered verse has rhythm. Rhythm and meter encode in the body. Good poetry has a way of getting underneath the thinking mind to the deeper recesses of subconscious experience, underneath the skin and into the nervous system. Poetry turns our attention toward the sensual, toward feeling and toward being. Sensual experience, feeling and being in turn, draw us into the present moment. Poetry pairs well with the practice of meditation.

The excerpts of poetry and scripture—many translated from the original Tibetan, Pali, or Sanskrit—are contemplative aids, selected to assist your meditation practice. The translations here are my own unless otherwise noted. Feel free to dwell on them and bring them into your practice. Invite them into your body. Scriptural poetry has the power to stimulate insight across the ages, and it can draw us into relationship with the mystics who can become like spiritual friends in this life.

PART ONE

THE EARTH BODY

Don't search for isolation in a mountain retreat. The mountain of your body is the best sanctuary.

—Maitrīpa

The Body's Mindfulness

Be strong then, and enter into your own body;
there you have a solid place for your feet.
Think about it carefully!
Don't go off elsewhere!
Kabir says this: just throw away all thoughts of imaginary things,
and stand firm in that which you are.¹

—Kabir

WHEN I WAS eight years old, my mother took me to an ashram to learn how to meditate. The practice was called Transcendental Meditation (TM). Because I was so young, my teacher—a pale, wraithlike swami named Eleanor—gave me special instructions. She suggested I meditate while walking or doing a simple activity such as a puzzle. I chose walking on the steep residential streets and walkways of my neighborhood. Sometimes I climbed my favorite tree around sunset and meditated up there.

Meditation felt purposeful and like a practice of befriending myself. It was different from anything I had done before. But, as it turns out, I was stepping into something very old. Five-thousand-year-old wall carvings depicting human figures seated in meditation posture have been unearthed in ancient Indus Valley archeological sites.

Meditation is a subtle technology. It has nothing to do with being religious per se but rather exploring the inner life, figuring out who we are, and finding safe space. This ancient practice has now found its way into hospitals, schools, prisons, and the military, proving itself to be profoundly relevant to our lives at this present time. And it is perhaps even more urgently needed now than ever. While this world is speeding up, the need for us to slow down is becoming increasingly apparent. As we slow down, we learn to nurture the self consciously, sanely, and compassionately. Most of all, meditation helps us kindle appreciation for the present moment, no matter what is happening.

The Sanskrit term for meditation is *bhāvanā*. *Bhāvanā* means “to cultivate” or “to develop.” Meditation involves cultivating a way of being that is calm, embodied, spacious, and present-moment focused. We cultivate this way of being not primarily by engaging the intellect but by gradually training this body-mind organism to engage skillfully with whatever is here now.

In order to engage skillfully, muscles are needed. In some ways, meditation resembles working out more than it resembles a study session. In meditation, we develop muscles that are more somatic-affective than intellectual. We develop skills of attention, relaxation, alertness, compassion, and embodied presence. Like in a conventional gym workout, these skills get stronger with repetition and use.

The muscles of meditation are important because they help us stay in the present moment, the only moment there is. Becoming radically present unlocks a richness and depth that we may not yet fathom. And it is so important because without presence, we may very well miss our life.

Mindfulness

There is a difference between meditation (*bhāvanā*) and mindfulness (*smṛti*, pronounced “smir-ti”) in the Buddhist tradition. Meditation refers to the

cultivation of a way of being. Mindfulness refers to a faculty of attention employed and developed in the process of that cultivation.

Smṛti, the Sanskrit term for mindfulness, literally means “that which is remembered.” In the ancient pre-Buddhist Vedic tradition of India, the word referred to the oral tradition—specifically, to the sacred Vedic texts that were memorized word for word and passed down orally from generation to generation via rhythmic chanting as a way of preserving religious knowledge. The sacred texts were smṛti in that they were remembered and retained in the mind of devotees.

When the Buddha came along around 500 B.C.E., he employed the term smṛti, with its connotation of memory, in a novel way. While in the Hindu context it referred to the memorization of sacred oral teachings, the Buddha used the word smṛti to refer to an innate faculty of attention—that is, the ability to remember or stay mindful of the present moment in a sustained way. When we meditate, we are remembering something important, but it is not words, scripture, or ideation. We are remembering to stay focused and not get distracted. We are remembering to pay attention.

Smṛti is a faculty of attention that can be directed to any object or to no object (in the case of diffuse or open awareness). Smṛti might be directed toward the breath or toward a feeling of your feet on the earth. It can be directed toward a sound or smell. When you direct attention and then keep it on one object for a while, it turns out, something surprising happens. Your mind settles down, your emotions stabilize, and you experience calm. This faculty of attention is consciously developed and strengthened by meditators in the service of cultivating a stable psychophysical state of tranquility. For that reason, the Buddha upheld smṛti—that is, attention or mindfulness—as a key ingredient to living the wakeful life.

But there is certainly more than one kind of attention, not all of which are mindful. Scattered attention is distracted and restless. Focused attention is narrow and sharp. Vigilance, an attention-like factor, guards against distraction. Panoramic attention is open and diffuse. And somatic attention, the kind emphasized in this book, engages and even emerges from the body.

Even though some translate *smṛti* as “mindfulness,” the semantic root for “mind” is not found within that term. *Smṛti*, either as memory or attention, is not solely a faculty of the mind. It is a faculty of the speech and the body as well. The body, as many psychologists and neuroscientists now believe, is absolutely capable of remembering. The body registers and stores our joys, sorrows, traumas, ease, and insight. The body is also capable of attention, and—as I will discuss below—even mindfulness.

Somatic Mindfulness

Toward the end of my year in Nepal, two of my friends and I—with nothing but our backpacks—boarded a crowded bus for the long, dusty overland trip to Lhasa, Tibet. We stayed for three months, traveling like nomads all around the country on the backs of trucks, staying in tents, and always aiming straight for the temples and monasteries.

On the walls of the temples we visited, we came across a certain mural again and again. The mural, which was usually in the entryway, depicted a monkey and an elephant traveling uphill on a winding path. It seemed to be telling a story. Eventually I asked one of the temple keepers what it meant.

The temple keeper, himself a monk clothed in deep burgundy robes with a face beautifully etched with the lines of time, replied that the mural was depicting the developmental process of meditation. The elephant, he explained, symbolized dullness. The monkey symbolized distraction.

“At the beginning of the path, the meditator’s mind is controlled by distraction and dullness, with distraction mostly in charge,” explained the temple keeper, pointing to the bottom of the mural where I noticed that the monkey was indeed leading the elephant by a rope.

“But by the end of the path, the monkey has fallen by the wayside. A monk has joined them, and is riding the elephant who has turned white, symbolizing that both dullness and distraction are tamed.”

“The monk,” the temple keeper explained, “is mindfulness.”

Indeed, the mural showed the monk gradually disciplining the elephant and monkey with his stick and lasso. In the final scene, at the very top, the path becomes a rainbow upon which a white elephant strolls toward the heavens, with the monk sitting in meditation posture on the elephant's back.

The image stays with me as a compelling depiction of the role of mindfulness on the path to tranquility. When we first start to meditate, the mind is all over the place. It is like the wild monkey, bouncing from one thought or idea to another. Or sometimes the mind is sleepy and lethargic like the slow elephant. It lacks the sharpness needed to pay attention in a sustained way. Neither of these states is conducive to concentration, clarity, or ease.

To tame our distracted, scattered attention, we turn it toward an object—the breath, for example. At first the mind will not stay focused for long. It bounces away, distracted by a thought or an idea. Or the mind sinks into torpor and forgets entirely what it was doing. What was it we were doing? Oh yes. Then we coax the mind back again to the breath. This happens over and over, a process called *placement and replacement*.

The faculty we use to bring the mind back is mindfulness—the monk with the stick. Every time the monk with the stick shows up, the muscle of attention is strengthened just a little bit. We learn to remember to stay on task, simply paying attention to the breath. As attention stays on its object longer and longer, the mind's restlessness begins to calm down, resulting in a state known as *śamatha* (tranquility).

This is one way to tame the mind, a cognitive approach to mindfulness. Mental discipline is employed to harness and gather attention, to keep it focused on its object.

But there is an alternative and complementary approach to developing mindfulness. This model is the yogic model of mindfulness. In a yogic approach, attention emerges from deep within the body. In this system, the path to a mindful life is not paved by taming and subduing but rather by surrender. This is the approach that I am calling in this book *somatic mindfulness*. Somatic mindfulness is *the body's mindfulness*, a relaxed,

loving attention spontaneously experiencing the present moment through the entire bodymind.

Like the monastic model, this model acknowledges and understands the mind's distraction, scatteredness, and discursiveness as sources of suffering. But the solution to dealing with this wild mind is not to harness control of it, setting attention back again and again on an object of focus.

Somatic mindfulness is informed by one very simple observation: the mind is distracted but the body is not. The body is not thinking or ruminating. It is just feeling and being present, aware, and vibrant. In other words: *the body is already mindful*.

The turning point in this model that sets somatic mindfulness apart from the more orthodox model comes at the moment of distraction. At the moment of distraction, instead of prioritizing control, a practitioner of somatic mindfulness releases control and allows attention to be drawn back *by the body* (or by the feeling of breath, which is, after all, a *somatic* feeling). Somatic sensation, such as the air in your nostrils or the rise of your diaphragm, re-centers attention. The return is experienced not as a discipline of effortful redirection by a higher executive function but as a natural draw to the body's steady wakefulness, like iron filings return to a magnet. Scattered attention represents the iron filings and the body is the magnet.

Put another way, the model is not one of taming but trust. Perhaps the monk does show up, but the monk does not have a stick. The monk prostrates to and dissolves into the breath. The doorway into a sustained, relaxed attention is to let go of control and find refuge in the body's immediate present sensory field. When the mind relaxes its grip on the process, the body models sustained attention. The body leads the way. It's a great relief for the mind, in fact.

If you have been struggling to develop mindfulness, this might come as a surprise. The secret to stabilizing your practice has not only been right under your nose but it is your nose—and the rest of your body too, for that matter.

If you are new to meditation, this might sound like a subtle difference, to allow attention to follow the body's lead versus developing mental attention *using* the body. But it turns out to be an important distinction, especially when it comes to the inner experience of meditation practice over time. Below is a practice of somatic mindfulness that can help you begin to discover your body's natural attention. As a reminder, this practice and the others in the book are available as audio recordings at www.Shambhala.com/WakefulBodyPractices.

PRACTICE

Surrendering to the Breath

Turn your attention to the breath. Notice its wavelike quality, how the breath rises like the swell of the ocean and then falls like the dip between swells.

Gradually explore the sensations that are unfolding as you breathe. Notice a fresh, alive feeling in your nostrils as you inhale. Notice the gentle warmth of the exhale. Notice the rise and fall of your diaphragm.

See if you can find a balance between paying attention and being relaxed, letting go of tension with every exhale.

At some point, after sitting awhile, you will become distracted and forget you have given yourself this task of focusing on the breath. Your attention will wander. You will become caught up in a train of thought.

Then there is the moment of noticing you are distracted. At that moment, do not make any effort to refocus on the breath. Instead, allow the breath itself to draw you back in. Let the natural sensations of breath moving within your body—the feeling of freshness in your nostrils, the rise and fall of your diaphragm, the expansion of your heart center—draw you back, like a magnet draws iron filings.

Surrender to the natural mindfulness of your body.

The Reflexivity of Meditation

Attention is a tool we use every day of our lives. It is not unique to meditation practitioners. Our attention is directed every day to aspects of our work, play, and relationships. But most of the time, attention is directed outward. We are paying attention to something outside the self.

Meditation involves cultivating a unique way of paying attention. What makes meditation unique is that we are not primarily turning our gaze outside the self. In most meditation practices, we are turning the gaze within.

When we meditate, we are paying attention to the inner landscape, the terrain of the body, breath, mind, senses, and emotions. We are becoming astute observers of the self. There is something mirrorlike about this. The object is observing the subject. As it is when we look in the mirror, meditation is inherently reflexive.

If you have a mindfulness practice already, you may have sensed the reflexivity of meditation. You sense it as the emergence of an inner gaze that scans the field of your experience. In this field you notice smells, visual input, thoughts, embodied feelings, and emotions. So much is going on! When we first start to meditate, it's a little challenging to know what to do with all the newly encountered features of this inner landscape. We can become quite curious and interested in it all. Attention roams around the field of experience.

But then we receive an instruction intended to help us develop a more focused attention, such as "Turn your mind toward your breath." This kind of instruction is designed to help settle our reflexive attention, which may be fairly restless and scattered, into an inward focused gaze that is stable and steady. While this is the ultimate aim of breath meditation, we go through a period in which this very act of turning attention inward toward this bodily sensation stirs up a storm. When we focus on the breath with micro-attention for the first time, we become, for want of a better word, self-conscious.

How does this storm of self-consciousness manifest? The act of turning attention in toward the meditator's own breath initially disrupts the breath. It seems as if we are unable to just observe the breath without changing it. This is because we are not used to just observing our own embodied experience in a sustained way, if we have gotten used to observing it at all. But before long, we develop an inward gaze, a way of paying attention to embodied experience simply and intently that becomes steadier with

practice. The inward gaze is nonconceptual, and it has a light touch. It is embodied and so does not “other” its object. It is focused enough to stay with the practice but relaxed enough not to get wrapped up in self-consciousness.

In the field of neuroscience, there is a similar kind of reflexivity called “metacognition.” Metacognition means thinking about one’s thinking. In other words, we don’t just think about things, but we also know that we are thinking about things. We have the sense of ourselves as cognitive beings making sense of our world, a kind of big-picture cognition.

Mindfulness meditation can be understood as a kind of metacognition. Meditation is a metacognitive activity in the sense that it is a process of getting deeply familiar with the workings of one’s own mind, body, and emotional self. But in meditation, the primary aim is not to think about thinking. Instead, we cultivate a steady attention that not only pays attention but also knows that it is paying attention. In other words, there is a reflexive quality to attention that becomes a host for all the experiences that unfold in the field of our immediate experience. Perhaps we could call this self-aware gaze *meta-attention*.

It turns out the kind of meta-attention cultivated in mindfulness may be more aligned with the embodiment circuitry of the brain than thought circuitry.² This means that while we are becoming more attentive, and attentive to attention, we are also becoming more embodied, less in the sphere of rumination and more in the sphere of sensual, interoceptive, and proprioceptive experience. So, not only is there a cultivation of attention but that meditative attention draws us into the regions of the self that connect us to the body, which has a quality of nonconceptuality and a quality of the animal self.

Yoga

Chandra’s yoga class began in the soft light before dawn. At a certain point, when the glow on the horizon turned from pink to orange, Chandra would

declare, “My dear yogis! The sun is rising! The time has come to salute him.”

I was surprised he called us “yogis,” given that we were a grimy band of young Americans trying our best to do child’s pose in our jeans. I had always assumed that a yogi was someone who had practiced for a long time, but Chandra insisted that we too were capable of growing into this new practice—yogis every one.

At that time, I thought yoga meant physical exercise. Back home in the United States, where the first yoga studios were starting to open, the word *yoga* always seemed to mean this activity of stretching and holding poses. But in Nepal I would learn that *yoga*—in Indian traditions—does not mean exercise. It means spiritual practice. In the Sanskrit language, the literal meaning is “union,” because spiritual practice results in the union of body and mind, and the union of the mundane and the sacred.

Even the *hatha* yoga and *raja* yoga disciplines outlined in Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* (that we might categorize as “yoga” and “meditation” in popular language) were not practiced in isolation from each other. In yogic traditions, to be a serious seeker of peace means to take body and mind both to their ultimate place of freedom.

Another myth about yoga is that it is a practice of India. In actuality, yoga spread into the Himalayas before the first century. It is a central concept in the Buddhism of Nepal, Tibet, Sikkim, Ladakh, and Bhutan. When Tibetans first began translating Buddhist texts into their native tongue, they chose to use the word *naljor* as the translation for *yoga*. *Naljor* means “joining with naturalness.” Naturalness (the *nal* of *naljor*) gestures toward something innate, a deep authenticity that is the core of who you are (and who others are also). *Nal* is who you were before you were born, before you believed yourself to be separate. The masters say it is who you still are but don’t know it.

Naturalness has something to do with our wildness, beyond the civilizing influences of the everyday mind. The everyday mind fabricates. It plans. It manages. It interprets and seeks meaning. Its energy is tight. Naturalness is the part of the self that is unconstructed, spontaneous, free,

unmade, and without plans or agendas. It is a part of you that is at ease in your own skin, and it does not resist being present. This part of you is aligned with the realm of the body and can be felt there. The body is, after all, an animal.

Jor, the second half of the word *naljor*, means “to join” or “connect.” In the practice of yoga, we are joining, connecting, and finally fusing with naturalness. In one sense of the word *naljor* (yoga), we are joining and fusing with something that has always lived deep within us but from which we stray. So let’s say—for clarity—that *jor* actually means “rejoining.” When we practice yoga, we are rejoining with our natural state, the innate sacredness, an innate wakefulness, and freedom that is our birthright. This is why many practitioners of yoga describe an intuitive sense of return or homecoming when they practice yoga.

In another sense of the word *naljor* (yoga), we are joining or connecting to the natural world around us—to the trees, flowers, grasses, wild animals, lakes, rivers, oceans. Just by going deep into your own natural body, you discover you have always been an integral part of the wild world. The wild world is our mirror and our muse. The elements of sky, wind, earth, water, and fire; the creatures and plants of our ecosystems; and the entire planet’s natural maṇḍala are an ongoing inspiration to the practices of yoga and meditation.

Meditation is or should be yoga, a coming home to our own intrinsic naturalness within and a coming home to the wild, natural world outside. Yoga, too—the physical kind—is or can be meditation, a cultivation of deep peace, focus, and freedom. But even this division into “yoga” and “meditation” is an illusion, a false dichotomy. In the indigenous contexts out of which these practices come, yoga and meditation cannot be divided. It is impossible, just as we cannot divide the self from our own wildness.

Be spontaneous, like a child.

Be uncontrived, like an infant.

Be fearless, like a lion.

Plunge in, like an elephant into water.

Play, like a dog.
Wander, like a fly.
Be natural, like a madman.

—Maitrīpa

2

The Body in the Body

Come friends,
contemplate the body in the body!
Ardent,
clearly comprehending,
unified,
with concentrated one-pointed mind,
in order to know the body
as it really is.

—The Buddha, *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*

MANY OF MY memories of childhood are connected to sensory experience: the smell of privet flowers on the streets of Berkeley, the feeling of the blood rushing to my head as I hung upside down on the monkey bars in grade school, the sound of the first few notes of “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.” When adolescence hit, self-consciousness set in. My body felt more unpredictable, something that I could no longer control. My dysfunctional relationship to my body that I experienced in college was a kind of attempt at control, a way for the mind to override the body.

It took my encounter with the wisdom of the Buddhist teachings to help me untangle my negative body story and dysfunctional behaviors. A key

part of healing was gradually developing the understanding that this thing that I think of as “my body” is not my body at all. These teachings helped me discern that the ideas and opinions I hold about my body coalesce into a body-like approximation that I have lately been thinking of as the *conceptual body*.

The conceptual body consists of all the ideas and opinions we have about the body. Your conceptual body might be fat, thin, beautiful, ugly, young, or old. Social scientists call it “body image.” One researcher defends it as “the multifaceted psychological experience of embodiment.”³

Body image, according to specialists in this field, consists of the thoughts, ideas, and evaluations that we carry about the body. These thoughts result in beliefs about the body as an object in the world. In some cases, body image becomes distorted, leading to psychological disorders such as anorexia or body dysmorphia.

Body image is not necessarily problematic, and it is certainly not pathological. Each of us carries beliefs, ideas, and evaluations about the body. However, we may not have examined how true these beliefs really are, how much cultural conditioning may play a role in shaping our beliefs. We may long have assumed that our body image is our actual body.

In reality, there is much more to our body than what we think about it. In fact, from the perspective of Buddhism, the conceptual body (or body image) is *not* the authentic body but rather a profusion of concepts. The authentic body is not conceptual at all. It is the body of this present moment, the one you are experiencing—the one you are feeling—*right now*. This is not the body you had yesterday or even in the last five minutes. This is the body of now, and it is beyond your beliefs and ideas. It is beyond image, appearance, or gender.

There is a term for this body of the present moment, this rich field of lived sensory experience. This living organism, the one that is feeling, hearing, seeing, smelling, breathing, and vibrating with life right now in the present moment is called *the experiential body*. This is the body you experience rather than the one that you think about. It is where you experience pain and pleasure. It is also where peace, focus, and joy are

found. The experiential body is authentic in that it is not contrived or fabricated by thoughts and ideas. It exists as a body of nonconceptual feeling.

When it comes to the practice of meditation, attention is primarily directed toward the experiential body. This is the key to your understanding the work you are about to do. Knowing what you are feeling, when you are feeling it, is a key skill for cultivating somatic mindfulness. Yet the experiential body is all but ignored by broad swaths of our intellectual culture. It lives in the shadows explored by poets, mystics, and healers. It is so neglected that if you begin to pay attention to it now, you may have difficulty distinguishing it from the conceptual body, the one you have related to for so long as your “real body.”

When I use the word *body* in this book (after this chapter), I am referring to the experiential body, the present-moment sensory, energetic, or affective experience. When I refer to the conceptual body, I will try to indicate that in some way. While meditation turns us toward the experiential body, the conceptual body cannot be ignored, even by meditators. It must be addressed because it might be the body we know best.

The Conceptual Body

The conceptual body’s existence is not necessarily obvious. The beliefs and assumptions we hold about our body can be so subtle that they remain hidden and unarticulated.

In my twenties, sometime after returning from Nepal, I became ordained as a Buddhist nun. With ordination came vows, many of them directed toward restraining the body and the mind. We were expected to move slowly, eat politely, and refrain from indulgences.

On the positive side, the monastic life was one of voluntary simplicity. I wore the same clothes every day, shaved my head, and ate basic healthy foods. The simplicity was healing and provided space to direct my energy toward study and practice.

Also on the positive side, we were encouraged to relate to the body as a vessel for generosity and wholesome action. Thinking of my body in this light turned my focus away from the individual self and toward community. My body now had a meaning beyond its mere appearance. It felt like a vessel for service.

But, at least for me, there was also a dark side to the constraints placed on the body. My daily actions and choices were now shaped by the monastic schedule and the demands of living in community. For the first time in my life, my body came to feel as if it were not fully my own. In this new life I experienced an eroding of my sense of agency.

As my sense of agency eroded, I felt the body of the present moment, my experiential body, recede into the background. Whatever my body was actually experiencing—cravings, hunger, cold, fear, anger—seemed relatively unimportant compared to the larger mission of whatever was happening for the body monastic, writ large. So I gradually stopped listening to my experiential body. As I sacrificed self for community, my embodied sense of self receded. This is how powerful the conceptual body can be. When the ideas, opinions, and concepts dominate our relationship to body, our sense of agency in the world is adversely affected.

It was only after some years and deepening in the practices of Buddhism and self-reflection that I came to realize the powerful role the conceptual body exerted on my life and my choices as a monastic. In time, I began to discover texts and practices that turned me more deeply toward my own experience and encouraged me to trust my body and listen to it. The very first of these was the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*, a scripture that I encountered in the monastery library.

The Experiential Body

In the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*, or “The Presence of Mindfulness Scripture,” the Buddha taught four kinds of mindfulness: mindfulness of body, mindfulness of feeling, mindfulness of mind, and mindfulness of phenomena. This

scripture, containing one of the Buddha's most well-known teachings, establishes the body as the basis for mindfulness.

In this scripture, the Buddha encourages his disciples to meditate on "the body in the body" (*kāya kāye*). While it is not certain what the Buddha meant by "the body in the body," he seemed to be saying that contemplating the "body" is not enough. His voice, echoing down through the ages, asks us to find the body within the physical body, a deeper hidden body. Only then will we "know the body as it really is," in the Buddha's words.

Perhaps the Buddha meant that we need to get underneath our *idea* of the body, our mental construct. It is possible to go much of our lives thinking that our idea of the body is the same as what the body really is. This mistake is understandable given the trust we tend to place in the mind's ideas.

But there is actually a lot more happening right now than the idea of the body, more than your mental construct of what it is and how it is. Right now, your breath is breathing. Your heart is beating. The breeze is stimulating your skin. Your ears are hearing sound. Your eyes are seeing light and color. All this is beyond your ideas.

This simple and immediate world of perception is so ever present that we often overlook it, in the same way that we get used to the fragrance of jasmine after smelling it for a minute. We take our sensory field for granted. But it is always there, a vibrant embodied part of our moment-by-moment experience. Welcome to the universe of your experiential body.

In the universe of your experiential body, with its fresh sensory perceptions, movement and change are happening. This body's present-moment sensory experiences are not the same from one moment to the next. The soundscape is changing. Your eyes are scanning the visual field, sometimes reading the words of this book, sometimes raising up to take in the space around you. Even if you are completely still, thoughts and emotions are moving. The experiential body flows, unlike the conceptual body, which tends to be fixed in time.

The experiential body, however, is not only your ever-changing sensory field. It includes your thoughts and emotions. When you pay attention, you

even notice that the energetic activity of your mind and the moods of your heart extend and flow throughout your body, registering in your face, shoulders, and torso. When you are lost in thought, your breathing becomes shallow. When you are depressed, your shoulders slump. When you are ruminating, your facial muscles tense. Every state and mood of your mind is embodied.

This experiential body is vaster and deeper than it appears to be at first glance. Sensory, mental, energetic, and emotional worlds interacting in the field of your present-moment experience turns out to be a vast and subtle territory. If the conceptual body is the outlying territory, this experiential body is the heartland explored by practitioners of meditation and yogis alike on this journey of waking down.

The experiential body is a kind of “body in the body.” It is not the body as you understand it but the body as you *feel and experience* it right here and right now. It is also not the body’s mere materiality. It is the body’s aliveness. It is this sense of your body as fresh, vibrant, and awake.

The experiential body stands in contrast to the conceptual body because it is distinctly *nonconceptual*. It has little to do with what your mind believes or thinks. The experiential body, rather, has to do with what your body *knows, experiences, and feels*. The experiential body is your body’s knowledge.

So how do we get in touch with the experiential body, which is somewhat hidden some or all of the time? This is your journey’s common thread. The practices of somatic mindfulness are all intended to land you in the experiential body. What follows is one of these practices. It is a trapdoor leading from your thinking mind into your feeling body.

PRACTICE

Descent into Feeling

It may be true that there is no separating body and mind in an ultimate sense. But that is not our experience much of the time.

Much of the time, we dwell in the headspace, the upper part of our body above the neck where thinking and ruminating seem to happen. It almost feels as if we are trapped in the

head, not knowing there is any other place to go.

At the same time, when we are trapped in the head, everything below the neck, including the heart, feels somewhat numbed out. Sometimes even when we are hungry or in pain, we are not in touch with what is going on down there.

It seems as if we have no choice in the matter. The mind ruminates and away we go. But this default mode can be disrupted intentionally, with practice. We can learn how to drop—really descend—from the head into the body. When we do this, we begin to discover the richness of “the body in the body.”

It begins with turning attention to the body. Turning attention to the body is in itself an important skill. We are training our mind to notice that it can choose to engage with the body as its object. But this is only a first phase of the practice. When you turn attention to your body, you are still slightly removed from it. There is still “you,” the observer, paying attention to “your body,” the object of observation. You can learn to go deeper than that.

You can learn to saturate the body.

What do you notice right now below your neckline? It might be the feeling of your feet on the floor. It might be the cool tingling of the air on your arms. It might be the feeling of your diaphragm rising and falling as you breathe. It might be an ache in your body. Search your experience and find just one bodily feeling.

Try closing your eyes and let the feeling draw you down, so that your witnessing mind actually drops from the headspace into your body.

Travel down to the place where the feeling is most vivid and vibrant, then surround it with your attention.

What do you notice? Is there a coolness? A warmth? A tingling? A heaviness? Tension? Whatever is there, be curious and explore it.

At some point, encourage your attention to let go and dissolve into the feeling. Your mind is now **saturating** the feeling, as if your mind were water and the feeling a sponge.

At this moment, it is possible that you will lose track of the watcher. There is no longer a “me” separate from the feeling. There is just pure sensation.

When you drop in this way, whatever you were ruminating about or stuck on fades. You become less entangled.

This kind of practice helps you awaken, as if from a dream. In the dream, you believed your ideas about your body. But when you enter your body, there is just raw presence. The thoughts you so believed to be true fall apart like ash. In your dream, your mind seemed to be separate from your body, but when you wake up you discover mind and body are one.

The Problem of Blending

In the beginning, it is not necessarily easy to discern between the conceptual body and the experiential body because they are blended. This blending can present a challenge, especially if you hold negative judgments

about your body. If your thoughts about the body are tinged with aversion, this will impede your ability to contact the experiential body.

Several years ago, I was teaching a meditation retreat. In attendance was Sarah (not her real name), a cheerful, upbeat, sixty-five-year-old woman with dark curly hair and deep brown eyes.

On the first morning of the program, to get more connected to the body, we all got down on the floor on our yoga mats and into an asana, a horizontal posture. We were holding this asana for several minutes, getting into the body's feeling experience. After about a minute, I noticed Sarah was sobbing quietly on her mat. Later, when we had a chance to speak, I asked her what the tears were about.

"No one has ever asked me to get into my body. I avoid my body. When you ask me to come down into the body, it is so hard," she explained.

When I asked her why it was hard, she said, "I have always hated my body. I have always distrusted it. My body has done nothing but betray me."

Sarah's experience is not uncommon. Many of us carry painful beliefs and valuations about the body, based on our personal histories. These beliefs and valuations can generate a great deal of suffering, and they need to be examined because they can interfere with our ability to really get down into the feeling body.

In Sarah's case, her inner narrative about the body prevented her from engaging the instruction to go into her body. She assumed "body" must mean that place of pain, suffering, and unhappiness, as she had come to define it over the years. This is what happens when the conceptual and experiential bodies become blended. It becomes difficult to contact the freshness of the body in the present moment.

On the third morning of the program, Sarah took me aside and said, "Okay, so there is something here that is new. I mean, my body feels new."

It is a bit of a revelation to discover there is a place to dwell other than our thoughts about the body. When this happens, like Sarah, we encounter our body as something fresh to us, a present-moment body that is beyond

our judgments and ideas. It is just feeling, breathing, reaching, stretching, or relaxing. It is new.

Noticing we have two bodies, one old and one new, is the first task. The second task is to notice they are blended. We begin to see how our ideas about the body sometimes mix with this breathing, feeling, moving experience.

On a somatic path, the third task is to unblend. To unblend, we need to discern the difference between the body we have constructed with our thoughts and the body we are feeling. This helps us gradually disentangle from the concepts we have long held about the body, at least long enough to sink down into what is happening right here, right now.

This is not a rejection of the conceptual body. It is a discernment. The conceptual body is malleable. As we recondition our conceptual body, we discover that skillful reblending is possible. The conceptual body can be harnessed in support of the experiential body and vice versa.

Somatic Bypass

Sarah had previously shared with me that she was not new to the path. She had been exploring spirituality for two decades. In her early days of meditation in the seventies, she had a recurring experience of something she thought of as “pure consciousness,” which was blissful. In that state, it seemed as if the body disappeared, along with all of its problems, at least for the duration of the meditation session.

But she began to notice that once she stepped off the cushion, all her body issues, unhealthy eating patterns, and negative stories came rushing back. Over the years, even with meditation practice, this had not abated.

In fact, meditation became a place to go to reaffirm that pure consciousness was the main thing. In contrast, the body remained a dangerous place, even a place that was holding her back from pure consciousness. This perspective tracked well with her already-established

beliefs about the body dating from her childhood, and it put her mind and body at war with each other.

Sarah's experience turns out to be fairly common. If we carry unexamined denigrating beliefs about the body (or even more broadly, the self), we might seek out a spiritual practice or a meditation practice as a way to transcend the embodied state. In effect, our spiritual practice—which we might hold with sincere and loving aspirations—becomes an unconscious strategy of avoidance.

I have lately been thinking of such strategies of avoiding the body and its feelings as *somatic bypass*, the tendency to use spiritual practice to avoid or disassociate from the body. Even a technique such as meditation can become a form of somatic bypass, a way to turn away from the body and its feelings. We might meditate on the breath, for example, in a way that maintains distance from its full sensations. We might meditate on awareness at the expense of noticing the body's rhythms and signals. We can, in other words, cultivate a disembodied practice of meditation. A disembodied meditation practice is rarely, if ever, a conscious decision. It is more likely to stem from an unconscious aversion to the body's less pleasant sensations or a fear of the memories carried in the body and its energetic layers.

To avoid somatic bypass, we can start by taking stock of how we frame meditation practice. Is it a practice of mentalization and conceptualizing or a practice of listening to your own experience? I like to check in with myself from time to time to see if I am elevating consciousness or cognition and excluding or deprioritizing the body. Appreciating the body and inviting its feelings to be present helps keep our meditation practice embodied and grounded in reality.

Perhaps the best way to avoid somatic bypass is simply by developing a daily practice of moving into the body with curiosity and compassion. In that way, we gradually untangle our relationship to the body, even if that relationship is complex and checkered.

Pain

If you are going to delve into a practice of somatic mindfulness, you are going to have to work on your relationship to pain. Pain is a universal experience, and for some it is a daily experience. No matter who you are, pain is going to visit you, and it can kick you out of right relationship to the body.

Several years after taking monastic vows, I entered a long retreat—three years, three months, and three days long, to be exact. For those three years, I lived in a retreat house with ten women. We did a lot of sitting, and we even slept upright.

About midway through this retreat, I developed lower back pain. This was not just a few days of spasm. It went on for weeks. It was intense and unrelenting. I spent that time laid up on the floor on a makeshift mattress, only able to get up for short periods.

This was new to me. I had never experienced back pain before, and I had no idea that it could continue for such an extended period. That I could not carry my own body weight around anymore was devastating. It gave me newfound empathy for the many people who suffer from chronic pain.

Because I was in meditation retreat, I tried to apply some of my Buddhist practices to the situation. I tried meditating on the pain as an object of my attention, breathing into it and out of it. I tried meditating on compassion for others. I tried Medicine Buddha practice. I spent a lot of time wishing the pain away or trying to make it useful. I tried muscle relaxants, pain killers, and cold packs.

It was only after about two weeks, however, that I began to look into the pain more deeply. When I did, I noticed something truly surprising. There was something in all this that the meditation practice and the cold packs were not touching. There was an unacknowledged feeling simmering below the surface, something just as debilitating as the pain.

That feeling was *fear*.

I was afraid of the pain, afraid to move, afraid to walk. I was afraid that the most basic human activities would permanently damage me. The fear became paralyzing.

I had landed on something universal that I had not seen before. When we are in pain, more is going on than just physical sensation. Our emotions, resistance, and fear get triggered, compounding the pain.

The Buddha, it turns out, described this phenomenon in one of his teachings. He used the analogy of a man shot consecutively by two arrows. The first arrow is pain. Pain is human and inevitable. The second arrow is suffering. Suffering is the resistance, fear, and aversion we heap onto pain. The second arrow is a choice. We can do something about it. It may take some time, but we gradually see the second arrow. Once we notice the second arrow, we can pull it out.

In my case, I attribute this recognition of the second arrow—fear—with my recovery. While I could not wish my back pain away, I could find compassion for my fear. This was the healing I needed.

I realize things don't always work that way. Sometimes we are in so much pain that we cannot even see the second arrow, much less do anything about it. But that experience has given me confidence that in many circumstances, if we pay attention, pain can pave the way to liberation. We just need to stay with it and notice the second arrow.

The Precious Human Body

The very first meditation practice Himalayan monks learn in their path of training is a contemplation called The Precious Human Body. This is a contemplation on gratitude for the body's kindness and the small blessings of this life. This practice would become a critical factor in helping me reshape the distortions that as a young woman formed my conceptual body.

I first encountered this practice thirty years ago in a monastery on the Hudson River in New York State where I did my training. At the time, I lived in a tiny rustic room in a barn on the monastery property. I would awaken an hour before dawn every morning, sit at the feet of the Buddha statue, and contemplate the value of my life.

I would thank my feet for carrying me to the meditation hall, thank my eyes for allowing me to feast on the soft dawn sunlight, thank my nose for the aroma of the incense. I would even thank my cells for quietly and constantly keeping disease at bay.

To start the day in this way is profound. It sets up the day as something to be grateful for. No matter what, this day is blessed because your body is here.

PRACTICE

The Precious Human Body

In the morning, give thanks for your breath, heart, liver, and lungs. Let yourself marvel at the ingenuity of your hands, the sturdiness of your feet, and the strength of your spine.

Connect to the openhearted, warm, joyful feeling that is gratitude. For each body part, extend that moment for at least the duration of one full inbreath and one full outbreath. Let the breath expand your heart. *Dwell* in gratitude.

Now and then, throughout the day, notice how your senses fill your world and invite you into the present moment. Notice the richness of smells, the fullness of tastes, the luminosity of the visual field and the soundscape. Notice how the breeze makes your skin tingle.

Consider, in what ways have you been neglecting your body or putting off its needs? What is one kind act you might do for your body today? Take time out of your day to offer your body something it needs: a brisk walk, a healthy meal, a stretch, a bath, a massage.

As the day winds down, allow kindness to become reverence. Consider that this body is where all transformation happens. It is the doorway to your joys and the place where your sorrows will be metabolized and healed. It is where you will experience the fruition of your meditation practice.

Meditation on the preciousness of your human body is a powerful way to begin to recondition your conceptual body. You are rewriting your body story in a way that recognizes the body's deep and profound value.

Our loves, work, joys, opportunities, education, peak experiences—these are all mediated through this body. Meditation, too, is impossible without the body. Meditation begins with the gateways of our body, breath, and senses. We journey through the body to the freshness of the present moment.

In Buddhism, there is an idea that the body is by nature a maṇḍala, a sacred universe. In this sacred universe of the body, everything that unfolds is a blessing. The principle of maṇḍala has to do with the idea that how we perceive our world is a choice. We can perceive this world as a dingy, dirty, unpleasant place. Or we can perceive our world as a paradise.

When we say the body is a sacred universe, this is an encouragement to dwell on the body in its vastness, mystery, strength, and all the small ways it miraculously supports this life. Like the maṇḍala inhabited with moody and colorful deities, the body is home to bliss and pain, joy and sorrow, fear and trust, anger and peace. All these live in this body. It is possible to view the body's entire complexity, its symphony—the whole picture—as a richness, as a sacred dance.

All the tension and darkness of our embodied life is held in a scaffolding of balance and symmetry, a natural order that is hard to see, like the ocean's turbulence is held by its depths.

Archetypes

There are some people in life who you are just drawn to. It is not so much about what they do or have done for you, or what they have. It is about their energy. It has something to do with what they are made of.

My grandmother was such a person. She died a long time ago, but I can still see her vividly, her large, soft body draped as it always was in floral cotton or sometimes plaid, her freckled hands, her eyes twinkling. Her kindness was radiant. She was always thinking about what she could do for others. Still when I think of her, my heart melts.

I met a Buddhist teacher like this once who became my refuge teacher.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, as he was called, was a gentle giant. His hands were like doves, his face like a moon. His voice had a deep rumbling quality like thunder from a distance. When he looked at me, I felt like I was bathed in light.

This kind of person seems to be who they are without effort. Perhaps they have worked on themselves. Perhaps it was the way they were raised. Perhaps it is karmic. It seems to result in a spontaneous benevolence.

I think there is something about people like this that has to do with the body's energetic field. They don't just aspire to kindness. They radiate it. They have dissolved some of the barrier between head and heart, between the wish for goodness and goodness itself.

In the scriptures of Buddhism, there are many tales of beings like this—beings of radiance, both human and animal. They are called *bodhisattvas*, which means “wakeful being.” These beings are archetypes of compassion and joy. They live to serve others.

A body that radiates kindness can teach you more about the integration of head and heart than any scripture. It can be as simple as visualizing an archetype, just calling them to mind. I'm not talking about something exotic or spiritual. They can be people or animals you have known in your life who radiated spontaneous kindness.

These beings are timeless. But in some instances, we have let them get stuck in time. This is not what they would want. They would want to be a part of our lives—all they need is an invitation.

This kind of practice is a powerful form of wordless transmission. There are even meditation practices in which you visualize your body merging with the body of a bodhisattva. Inviting the spirit of kindness into your body reminds you that you too have a natural kindness sleeping in your body, that your life can also be in service to others.

A Field of Support

During my first week in Kathmandu, my Tibetan mother, Tashi, made panfried bread and sweet tea for me every morning. One day, putting the plate in front of me, she took my hand in hers, turning it over and tracing my palms.

“You are too thin. You must eat,” she said.

I could feel the inner strident part of me—the one built up over two years of disordered eating, self-criticism, and shame—softening. It just could not hold its ground in this new place where food was scarce and kindness was bountiful. Tears welled in my eyes. I could not tell where Tashi’s hand ended and mine began.

Some people think meditation is a solitary or reclusive act. Nothing could be further from the truth. Meditation thrives on relationship.

While you might not think it at first blush, mindfulness is inherently *intrarelatational*, which is to say relationships are cultivated within the self. You are developing a new relationship with your body, breath, mind, and emotions.

But some forms of meditation are explicitly *interrelational*, which is to say you are not alone in your practice. This does not mean that you invite a real person to sit next to you or in front of you when you practice meditation. It means that you visualize other beings as part of your meditation, beings in whose presence you feel safe and loved.

Just to remember being in the presence of someone who loved you or inspired you, past or present, opens the heart. Tashi is an example of one such person from my life. If you reach back in time, you might remember such people too.

In yogic Buddhism, every meditation session begins with invoking a field of support. The field might be just one kind person. Or it might be a collection of beings. Your field of support can include teachers, relatives, friends, animals, saints, sages, bodies of light, spirits, or guides. Time and space are not factors. You can invite someone long passed away. There is no limit to who might appear in your field.

For the sake of describing this practice, I’ll call the beings in your field “guides.” The criterion for a guide is simple: someone in whose presence you feel safe and loved. The idea is that, in the presence of your field of support, you can relax, open your heart, and feel accepted just as you are.

In the beginning you might want to invite just one being. Whoever springs to mind is probably just right—you do not have to overthink it. As time passes, more beings will naturally show up in that space.

PRACTICE

The Natural Refuge Tree

Let your attention descend and pool at the base of your body, where your body comes into contact with the cushion or chair.

Imagine that from the base of your spine roots grow deep into the earth, spreading and coiling out to anchor you to the ground below.

Let your attention move from your hips up your spine.

Your spine is the trunk of this tree: strong and upright but supple.

The tree grows out of the crown of your head and reaches up into the sky above you, spreading into a canopy of branches, leaves, and blossoms.

Looking above in your mind's eye, you see the branches swaying gently in the wind, whispering in the breeze.

As you gaze upward through the canopy of branches, you begin to glimpse faces.

The branches of this tree are peopled with benevolent presences, those who have taught, inspired, guided, and loved you throughout your life: teachers, guides, kind relatives, loving friends and family, children, pets, buddhas, animal spirits, guides, saints, sages, angels. Some are living, and some have passed on. You feel them as if they were truly present.

They are smiling, gazing down at you with eyes of loving-kindness and compassion, accepting every part of you unconditionally. They glow with the light of wisdom. It emanates from their true nature, beyond what you have conceived them to be.

Gradually, this love and wisdom begins to flow down from their bodies, taking the form of a warm, heavy, luminous sap. The sap flows slowly down inside branches of the tree, down the trunk, and enters the crown of your head, filling your head, neck, shoulders, and chest. It flows down your arms, filling your hands and fingers. It flows into your diaphragm, belly, abdomen, hips, thighs, calves, ankles, feet, and toes.

Your entire body is filled with this golden sap of love and wisdom.

Rest and continue to receive this warm, heavy light into every cell of your body, into every part of your heart and mind. Receive it into your struggles, fears, and hopes. Receive it into the parts of yourself that are rigid or contracted, into your self-doubts and your resistances, into your sense of things not being enough. Just receive. Let this nectar flow through you down into the roots and earth below.

As you get ready to end your session, allow the sense of separation between your self and your field of support to dissolve. Letting go completely, even the visualization dissolves into boundless light.

Releasing all effort, allow this open, warm, boundless awareness to meditate you.

The precious tree of nondual mind
spreads through the universe;
it bears compassion flower and fruit,

though there is no “other”
and no “doer of good.”

—Tilopa

Grounding

Having just awakened, the bodhisattva placed his right hand upon the ground and said,

The earth is witness for all beings
impartial toward all that lives.

O Earth, will you mirror the truth?

O Earth, will you be my witness?"

—Tenzin Chogyal, *The Life of the Buddha*

THE BUDDHA'S LIFE story describes the moment of his enlightenment. It happened at the first glimmers of dawn, after a night of meditating alone under a great bodhi tree. After his awakening, the story goes, he reached down to touch the earth with his right hand, requesting Mother Earth (*pr̥thvīmātā*) to be his witness.

For generations of meditation practitioners, this simple gesture has become a reminder to remain close to the ground. It is the place all of us begin, and it is a place of return.

When I was in three-year retreat, the ground became important, almost like a living presence. For three years, the ten women I lived with only had a quarter acre of ground in our life, so every square inch of ground became beloved: the overgrown yard, the worn dirt path around the perimeter of the retreat, the floor of the outhouse.

In retreat, I took to a practice of grounding. This is a practice of establishing a relationship with the earth below, knowing it is there and feeling its presence. The ground is solid, stable, and supportive, and we can lean on it. It is reliable, even when everything else is shifting.

In Buddhism, the ground symbolizes our deepest resources. Deep down, we already have what we need in this human body and mind. Just as we rely on the earth to support us each and every day, we can trust the innate resources at the ground of our being. A spiritual path is like the tending of this ground, like the act of gardening. When we attend to our innate capacities, they blossom as qualities of heart, attention, and embodiment.

In yogic Buddhism, there is a belief that the Buddha's body lives within each of us as dimensions of our own embodiment. One of these dimensions is called *nirmāṇakāya*, "the metamorphic body." The *nirmāṇakāya* is the dimension of our being that is physical, made of flesh, blood, and bone. It is the earth body within each of us that makes metamorphosis from a sentient being into a buddha possible. In this chapter and the next, we will explore this physical dimension, this earth body. We will cultivate its soil, tend its natural groundedness, and access its stability.

The result of this cultivation, you would think, would be some kind of grand experience, a satori, an elevation of consciousness. But it turns out the result—this thing called bodhi—is a return to the ground, a coming home to the most basic and stable dimension of our being. It is so simple as to be humbling.

The Art of Pause

Meditation is a form of deep listening. We are listening to the inside world, to the subtle symphony of our own embodied experience. If we do not pause, it can be difficult to hear that symphony over the cacophony of the outside world.

I once visited a monastery of the venerable Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. I was not there for retreat but for a conference. During orientation,

we were informed that mindfulness bells would sound on campus throughout the day as part of the monastery's protocol.

"When you hear the bell," the monk said, "everyone pauses for a moment of mindfulness. Please join us in this practice."

I admit to being less than enthusiastic. *This is not a meditation retreat, it's a conference*, I sighed. The first time the bell rang, I was in the middle of taking a bite of food at lunch. Suddenly the clinking of bowls stopped, and everyone laid down their utensils. Taking a cue from everyone around me, I too stopped midway through my fork's journey to my mouth. It took some self-control not to roll my eyes.

As the gong faded, we went back to eating. The next time it happened, I was in the middle of an intense conversation with a friend on the patio. She stopped midsentence. We smiled at each other for a beat. Then I found myself closing my eyes, savoring the breeze on my skin and the sound of the birds in the tree nearby.

When we resumed talking, something had changed. Open space had entered into the conversation. There was less of a rushed quality to our speech, and we enjoyed each other more.

By the end of the conference, I was surprised to find myself deeply appreciating this small repetitive ritual. Part of the power of the practice was the unexpectedness of the bells. When caught off guard, it was easy to notice how enmeshed I was in thought, how far from present-moment attention. Every pause was a collective acknowledgment of the disruption necessary to reset attention to the body, the senses, the here, the now.

Lately my "mindfulness bell" has been the coo of a pair of mourning doves that live in my backyard in Boston. Once every hour or so, I hear them. It is a reminder to drop everything, pause, and be truly present.

You too can insert contemplative disruption into your daily life. Start by finding your own mindfulness bell, a sound you hear a few times per day. It might be a horn honk, some church bells, some wind chimes, birdsong, or a siren.

When the moment comes and your "bell" sounds, stop whatever you are doing, no matter how involved. Let the forward momentum of your doing-

self just peter out, like a rolling ball comes to a rest. Enter your being-self.

At first this will be a challenge. Your habitual mind is likely to leap up and protest: “But this is really important! I’m doing something!” When this happens, you can ask the thinking mind to step back. I sometimes remind my thinking mind that this is for her benefit too.

Now that you have paused, come down into your body. Open your panoramic body to take in the entire landscape of the present. Notice the feeling of the ground beneath your feet. Notice your breath.

How is your body positioned in space? What you are seeing, smelling, sensing? What is the emotional tone of the moment?

Rest in the freshness of what is happening, right here, right now. Ground.

Take it all in. Stay attentive, open, and curious. After a short while, resume what you were doing. Take careful note of how it feels to resume your activity. Has anything changed?

Pauses helps us interrupt our trains of habitual thinking. In the gap left by the subsiding of the thinking energy, suddenly the experiential body comes alive.

As the nineteenth-century Tibetan teacher Patrul Rinpoche teaches, one day a disciple was lying down with his master looking at the canopy of the night sky:

Master: Do you see the stars in the sky?

Disciple: Yes, master, I see.

Master: Do you hear the dogs barking?

Disciple: Yes I hear.

Master: Do you hear the words I am speaking?

Disciple: Yes.

Master: That is it.⁴

Proprioception

In three-year retreat, I spent nine hours of every day in a meditation box in a corner room of the retreat house, engaging in a spiritual practice, or *sāadhanā*. *Sāadhanā* literally translates as “the way of accomplishing,” but it means a tantric liturgy. A *sāadhanā* can be as simple as breath meditation or as complicated as an ornate ritual.

Most of our *sāadhanā* practices opened with a Sanskrit mantra:

om svabhāva śuddha sarva dharma svabhāva śuddha ham

In English, the mantra means “Intrinsically pure are all things. Intrinsically pure am I.” A contemplative exercise went along with the mantra. As soon as we recited the mantra, we were instructed to meditate deeply in the following way:

Imagine the separation between self and world dissolves. You are interdependent with everything. The world and your body are seen in their true nature, intrinsic purity.

You sense your body firmly planted on this earth, but it is made of energy and light, translucent like a rainbow appearing in space. It is held and supported by the space but not separate from it.

Each of our practice sessions began like this. First, there was this dissolution into oneness with everything. Then there was a sense of the body arising as pure luminous energy. Something about this simple practice helped me feel that I belonged in the universe, that I was an integral part of it. I could feel my body more powerfully as an entity in space, held by space but also saturated with it.

It turns out that the sense of being in a body in space has a name. Scientists refer to it as *proprioception*. Proprioception, sometimes called the “sixth sense,” is the sense of the body’s position in space. It is found in all animals, and studies have even demonstrated its presence in plants.⁵ Proprioception is a kind of somatic self-awareness. Scientists say this sense begins with proprioceptor neurons distributed throughout the body. The

central nervous system integrates information from these neurons and other sensory systems to produce the overall subjective sense of our bodily position in space, and to facilitate the body's balance, movement, and acceleration.

Kinesthesia is an overlapping category. It literally means “sense of motion,” and refers to the network of neural pathways that facilitate movement. Found in all animals, kinesthesia relies on the same set of neurons and nervous system integration as proprioception, but it does not necessarily include balance.

Proprioception and kinesthesia have been demonstrated to respond to training. A recent study found that yoga practitioners are better able to process proprioceptive and vestibular body signals than a control group—which is to say, they had better balance and a keener sense of their body's presence in space.

But the study went further than that. The research team discovered that yoga practitioners who had a deep spiritual practice, who identified “with everything conceived as part of a unified whole reflecting the awareness of being an integral part of the universe,” had better proprioception. In other words, the subjects with a more cultivated inner dimension to their yoga practice were more embodied.⁶

The findings of this study make some sense given that the broad sacred intent of yoga is not to cultivate movements and balance. It is to join with the natural state. Our natural state is one of primordial belonging. We are an intrinsic extension of the planet. The sense of balance and bodily presence that characterize proprioception are an expression of this truth.

The Body's Time

In the West, our sense of time is linear and bounded. Time can be measured. We check our watches and count the days. Time passes and marches on. In our world, time is quantifiable.

In some mystic traditions, there exists a different sense of time. The Aranda people of Australia describe a “time out of time,” the time in which the ancestors live eternally. Similarly, Longchenpa, a meditation master of Tibet, said enlightenment gives us access to a “timeless time,” an absolute nowness that is unbounded and radically present.

This timeless time does not lean on the past or future. Having no beginning, middle, or end, it exists as a limitless unfolding. The present is always happening, without exception. In this sense, the now is eternal.

Even though this is the case, our ordinary mind resists limitlessness. It is ruminating on that thing you said this morning before you had your coffee. Or it is worrying about how you are going to pay for your kid’s college. The mind is secure with minutes and days.

The experiential body, however, is different. This body is not stuck in the past or planning for the future. The body of this present moment is just being, just breathing, just feeling. Absolute nowness is the time of the experiential body. It is close to the infinite.

When you practice with the experiential body, it is not hard to notice how the ruminating mind and the feeling body are operating in two different dimensions of time. The mind tends to view time as a continuum of passing moments. The mind dwells at different points on this continuum in memory and imagination. This linear dimension tugs attention away from the present. The experiential body’s dimension however is nonlinear. It does not ruminate on the past or future. It dwells in an expansive dimension of now, pulling attention back to the present.

As long as that lateral tug is happening, there is a sense of alienation, a pulling apart of the mind and the body. This is the duality of yogic understanding, not an existential dualism but a somatic one.

To heal the pain of that dualism begins with the simple act of inviting the mind to pay attention to the experiential body’s time, so that mind can learn a simple truth: there is just now. The mind notices that is all there is, and that draws us into the peaceful gap, the place where wakefulness is found.

PRACTICE

The Now Body

Right now, try settling on one steady sensation in your body—for example, the feeling of pressure where your feet rest on the ground.

Now ask yourself, *Is this feeling happening in the past? Is it happening in the future? Or is this feeling happening right now?*

Let the feeling guide you into the freshness of present-moment time. Let your body guide you into the heart of now.

Has there ever been anything other than this?

The Body's Honesty

One year after the conclusion of my first three-year retreat, I entered into a second. My teacher put me in the position of retreat manager. I made the weekly schedule, assigned duties, and fed the woodstove.

Even in a small retreat house, balancing the needs of individual retreatants with a smooth and fair functioning of the whole was sometimes challenging. When Trinley's knee pain prevents her from cleaning the shower and Pema is allergic to onions, you try to accommodate. But, as you can imagine, there were frustrations.

Trying to be a “good Buddhist,” I read the occasional disgruntled notes I received at lunchtime with as much patience and good humor as I could muster. But underneath, hurt simmered. My body knew it before my mind could. It was hard to name the emotion. There was a kind of heaviness in my heart, a contraction, that began to follow me every day.

It took a couple of months before my mind caught up. It may have only caught up because the silence and stillness of the retreat space allowed me to listen to my body. My body showed me the deeper truth: the notes evoked in me a feeling of inadequacy, a feeling that I was somehow not enough. This was not a new wound. Once I saw the wound, I could turn compassion toward it.

Being older, I now see how common this is. We can live for periods of our lives—days, months, or even years—with the hum of old wounds

simmering just below the surface. But for reasons that have to do with the particularities of our lives, we might have trouble seeing them.

Suppression is often a factor. We might suppress because this is an emotion that our family or religion has cast in a negative light. To acknowledge we have these feelings might make us feel ashamed or like a failure.

Or we suppress because we know that if we paid attention, we might have to reevaluate our life. If we listened to what is going on down there, it could upend plans we have long held inviolable.

Or we may just be trying to get through the day. Paying attention to a stressor takes time and energy that we may not have.

So the mind will lie to us. It tells us we are not feeling what we are feeling. At times, it may even weave a story to help us avoid confronting what hides below.

But the body tells the truth. If we turn to the body with curiosity and kindness, it will gradually show us how we feel. When that happens, we can begin to meet those truths with compassion.

Most of us remember a time when our body was telling us one thing and our mind was telling us something else. Then one day there is an inflection point when the mind is finally compelled to listen.

Somatic mindfulness can change the timeline on these inflection points. Listening to your body as an ongoing practice can help you notice the dissonances between body and mind sooner. If you learn to listen to your body's situational awareness and become attuned to its messages, you will discover some deep truths.

PRACTICE

The Body's Honesty

The next time you catch yourself feeling vague affective discomfort nudging at the edge of your consciousness, resist the urge to analyze, label, or follow the mental origin story (such as "I must be in a bad mood").

Instead, pay attention to your torso, your heart, your belly, your shoulders. What is happening with your breathing? In your face muscles? Is the feeling heavy or light? Tense

or loose? What is its texture?

Inhale breath into the feeling. Exhale from the feeling.

Now, with respect, openness, and curiosity, ask your body, “What do you need to show me?” and “What are you trying to tell me?” Find your own words. When you ask the question, be kind and nonjudgmental. Be present and without an agenda.

Your body will not release its truths if you have an agenda.

You may need to sit and wait for some time. Stay with the feeling in your body and remain connected to your breath.

Gravity

Ours is a terrestrial body. Like the big Earth is pulled toward the sun, the small earth of the body is pulled toward this planet, and while our journey is not an orbit, it is a grounding.

Everything we do is predicated on the existence of gravity, and yet how often do we notice it? It is a powerful and ubiquitous force, and yet how often do we consider its power? In cultivating a practice of somatic mindfulness, attention to gravity is important for one simple reason: *gravity grounds us*.

Consider your daily experience of the mind. Thoughts spin and weave. The mind jumps from one idea to the next, never staying long with any given concept or idea. The mind flies. This is both a miracle of the mind and its greatest challenge.

When we ride the flighty gusts of conceptuality, we can become ungrounded and entangled. It is not long before our entire being loses balance in this hurricane of thinking.

Now consider the body. While the mind is windy, the body is held stable by a force that pulls on every molecule and every cell. Gravity ensures we do not lose track of where we belong.

This is not an abstraction. You can feel the force of gravity right now, at this very moment, at the base of your body. If you bring your attention down to the lower part of your body, a place where your body comes into contact with a horizontal surface—your feet on the floor, your thighs on the

chair, or your bottom against a cushion—you will notice the weight of your body.

That weight is experienced as a pressure, a constant feeling that is at once electric and solid, a vivid heaviness. It is a daily reminder of the truth of our physicality. The gravity-bound body is so very real, so material, so undeniable.

Through that truth we encounter the body's natural stability, reliability, and capability for stillness. The groundedness of this body is something unchanging and stable in a world of constant change. This grounded body has the power to stabilize this flighty mind. Just as the body draws naturally toward the center of this earth, the mind can be encouraged to draw naturally into the body. This feeling at the base of your body can invite you into a deep place of restfulness.

PRACTICE

Finding Ground

Notice the weight of your body. Where do you most feel the weight of your body? Let your awareness settle into the place where your seat, legs, and/or feet rest against the cushion or chair you are sitting on. With curiosity, explore this feeling of pressure and groundedness, where your body contacts the earth, floor, chair, or cushion.

At this location, you can actually experience gravity, not as an idea but as a feeling. You can feel your body's attraction to the earth. Can you feel your body's natural groundedness and stability? Let your attention gather there, dissolve there.

When your mind becomes restless or preoccupied, let your body's groundedness draw your mind back, like a magnet draws iron filings. Notice how your body teaches your mind to be stable and still. You might say the body is capable of exerting its own gravitational pull on the mind.

Touching Base with GROUND

In this chapter, we learned to connect to the body as a physical entity, as solid, stable, and grounded. Between now and tomorrow, while you are standing or walking and at night before you sleep, connect with your body's natural groundedness. Notice how solid and tangible your body feels.

Experience your body as an extension of the earth. When you notice yourself getting drawn into the mind's dramas, offer yourself this simple instruction: "Ground." If you are alone, you can speak the word to yourself in a slow, deep voice. Come down into your body by feeling its weight, stability, and connection to the earth below.

In dwelling, live close to the ground.

In thinking, keep to the simple.⁷

—Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

Relaxation

This heart-mind
so tied up in knots,
if relaxed,
will free itself.
Have no doubt.

—Saraha

IN THE NELSON-ATKINS Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, sits a stunning life-sized statue of the female archetype of compassion, Guanyin (sometimes spelled Kuan Yin). It was carved in the eleventh or twelfth century from a single piece of wood.

Guanyin is a bodhisattva. This statue is not like most statues of bodhisattvas. Most are represented sitting with legs crossed, hands tamely in the lap and the back rigidly straight. This Guanyin is in the posture of “royal ease,” dressed in a flowing robe, lounging casually on a stone ledge.

Her right leg is bent up at her side, her foot flat on the stone’s surface near her hip. Her left leg drapes over the ledge, with her foot casually stepping on a blooming lotus. Her elegant right arm is fully extended out from the shoulder, supported on her right knee, her hand dangling loose at the wrist. She leans back on her left arm. It looks like you might encounter her on a bench at your local park.

In short, Guanyin is chill.

Her body posture is no accident. Depictions of Buddha figures are codified and historically ripe with significance. The posture of royal ease communicates—better than any text—that awakening is dignified, relaxed, casual, and easeful, expressed in and through the body.

Guanyin's posture is a reminder that we need to learn to relax. In fact, on the path of somatic mindfulness, it is a critical skill. While the word *relaxation* may conjure images of vacation, the spa, playing golf, and barbequing in the backyard, in yogic Buddhism, relaxation means something else.

Yogic relaxation is a thorough unwinding from deep within the bodymind. This unwinding is physical, energetic, mental, and spiritual.

My first Buddhist teacher, with whom I took refuge vows, expressed this kind of yogic relaxation in his entire body. I first met him in a small apartment in Kathmandu. He was physically huge, about seventy-six years old at the time, his thin white hair pulled into a topknot, his bare chest draped with red cords and an amulet.

What struck me right away was something that I would later only be able to describe as his *energy*. His entire body was radiating ease. It was as if he had just emerged from a sauna, but he was totally alert. When he looked at me, his eyes were warm with attention and devoid of pretense. It was clear within seconds that I was in the presence of an extraordinary being. I knew almost nothing about him, but I knew in that moment that he was my teacher.

Later I would come to understand that his all-over-body ease, attunement, and warmth was no accident. A lifetime of training in yogic practices had left him a clear channel for wisdom and unconditional love. He was my first teacher of yogic relaxation.

This kind of relaxation has nothing to do with laziness or a dearth of activity. It can become a default state of being, one that is effortless and easeful. And this kind of relaxation is not about being still per se, although stillness can help us discover this deep resource. Relaxation can exist in the midst of the most vigorous movement.

Think of the fluid upward motion of a thoroughly trained rock climber or the movements of a trained dancer. It is possible to be fully relaxed and in motion, just as it is possible to be utterly still and tightly wound.

Slowing Down

Our modern world is increasingly addicted to speed. Not a day goes by when we are without a phone in our pocket, a tablet on our lap. We see an ever-quickenning beat mirrored back to us in the screens that fill our time.

This quickening speed has a cost. One of my dharma teachers, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, describes it as a “speedy energy,” a restless energy that lodges in the body and nervous system. It seems to have a life of its own.

When it is simmering, we have trouble sitting still. It is as if this energy rushes ahead of the physical body, which is stumbling behind, trying to keep pace. It acts like tinder. When the right conditions hit, it boils over.

The speedy energy tends to seek distraction. It can be felt through the body, but it feeds on trains of thinking, worry, and busyness. When the speedy energy is in control, somatic mindfulness cannot be easily mastered.

But ironically, because the speedy energy lives and can be felt in and through the body, it can call you into the body. To stage an intervention, you need to begin with the body. Even when you cannot control your thoughts effectively, you can usually enact a physical instruction. To slow down, the body is the place to begin.

You can start right now with your eyes. They are reading the words on this page. You have probably been reading along apace, carried from one sentence to the next by the flow of ideas. What happens if you bring your eyes to a steady gaze right here on the word...

rest

Let your eyes rest on the word and its shape. Then on each letter. Notice the shape of the letters, the written word’s *texture*. Can you linger on its form, shape, and texture without thinking about the meaning? Rest your gaze on

the perch of the *r*. The half-moon of the *e*. Follow the curves of the *s*, the crisp edges of the *t*.

Allow the sound of the word to form, letter by letter in your mind. Hear the growl of the *r*; the open sound of the *e*, the whisper of the *s*, the stop of the *t*.

Slowing down is an art of changing your body's pace, such as stopping your eyes to rest on whatever is in front of you or walking more slowly from point A to point B. As you slow your body, notice the present-moment sensual texture of whatever is happening.

Take a bodily movement that you think of as routine (turning a page of this book, for example) and slow it down. How slowly can you turn a page? Feel the page as it brushes your skin. Notice the texture of the paper. Notice how the edge of the paper is sharp, the sides smooth. Notice the change of shadow and light as the old page turns over and new page is revealed.

Sometime today, try this again during some part of your daily routine—when you're doing the dishes, for example. Can you slow down enough to enjoy the warm water running over your hands? Can you savor the contours of a bowl as you run the sponge over it?

Try speech. What happens when you slow down just a bit while you are speaking, or when you pause more often between sentences? How does this affect your state of mind, the clarity of your communication?

Try walking. Pick a short distance, such as between your house and your car. What happens when you willfully slow your steps? Can you “be the walking” instead of “do the walking”?

PRACTICE

Screen Fasting

These days, many of us are in a frequent, almost constant relationship with digital technology. Many of these technologies are designed to capture and direct our attention in ways that reflect someone else's choices, not our own. They literally hold our attention hostage, and in the meantime, our freedom over our own mind slips away. To succeed at meditation, we need to slow down. But first we must reclaim our attention.

To facilitate the project of freeing your attention, assess the visual stimuli in your daily environment and set limits. Here are some things I do:

- In your free time, turn off your cell phone or put it on airplane mode as often as you can.
 - Talk to your spouse and children about joining you in screen moratoriums at home for agreed-upon days or times.
 - Prioritize in-person human, animal, and nature interactions over screen time. Make this an ethical commitment and tell your friends.
 - Consider enacting a “device sabbath” every week, turning off your phone and internet for a full day each week.
 - Make reading dates with those old-fashioned paper books on your bedside table.
 - Create boundaries and stick with them.
-

Unwinding

Every spring at my cabin, after the harsh winter of snow and deep freezes, there is the thaw. First is a sound: the trickling and dripping of water. Then there is the rushing of streams, spontaneously cropping up from the snowmelt.

And then, as the sun warms the earth, the green shoots appear.

One of the most miraculous is the fiddlehead fern. It nudges up from the ground as a tightly coiled spiral, and then slowly the sun and warmth coax it to unwind, unfurl, and eventually spread its fronds out wide.

The fiddlehead is like our body and mind on a path of meditation. At first we are tightly wound. We carry tension, tightness, and gripping that are largely unconscious to us. These tensions are not one-time events. They are patterns that have been with us for a long time. The Buddha called these patterns “karma.” Yogic Buddhism calls the patterns “knots,” places where our energy is stuck and frozen in the body.

When we meditate with the body, bringing awareness to the inner world, space opens up. Awareness, like sunshine in the spring, illuminates the dark places and thaws the parts of the self that are rigid and tightly held. Refinements of our attention—as loving, nonjudgmental, and effortless—are like the rich soil. Under such conditions the knots begin to loosen.

Some loosening is spontaneous. When the conditions are right, the knots just release. But the loosening of the knots is facilitated by a

conscious commitment to *let go*.

What are we letting go of? It is not the things of this life. It is simply the energy of grasping. Grasping is not an idea...it is not abstract. It is the energy of closing down around something: an idea, an object of desire, an emotion, a persistent thought. For example, you might grasp at the idea that you are incompetent, or at the newest smartphone. Grasping is a kind of impulsive tightness that believes in the absolute reality of the object it fixates on. You can feel grasping in your body. Much of the grasping we experience is not accomplishing a task but rather the result of a habit.

The Buddha believed this habit of grasping is at the root of human suffering. Most of the time, we don't even know why we are grasping, except that we believe in a way that is not even clearly defined, that whatever we are grasping at will bring us happiness.

Habits can be changed. We can develop a new habit in the form of *letting go*: letting go of a self-defeating thought, letting go of reactivity, letting go of a craving or addiction. These small or large graspings are the knots that keep our suffering in place. Because the energy of grasping manifests in the body, you can also start with the body, letting go of tension held in the shoulders, letting go of tightness around the eyes. As you let go in the body, you notice that it helps you release the grasping in the mind and vice versa.

PRACTICE

Letting Go

Breath by breath, try releasing tension in your face. Try your jaw. Now try your neck, your shoulders, your belly, your lower back, your hands. Now turn your attention to your thoughts.

Consider: *What is my relationship to these thoughts? How is it that I become entangled? Do I hold on to them? Or do they hold on to me?*

Take some time here to notice how your mind gets sucked into the vortex of thought. Notice how some thoughts are stickier than others.

In the middle of one of these episodes of chasing or sticking, ask this question: *What would happen if I just let go of this one thought? What if I just relaxed my grip, like unclenching a fist?*

Notice what it feels like to release and watch a thought float away.

On the heels of a release, there is the unwinding. The unwinding is an unfurling into a space of greater openness, relaxation, and ease. When the unwinding happens, we feel freer, more joyful, and more keenly alive. We can spread our wings.

Taking Your Seat

Formal meditation, of course, can help you cultivate relaxation. How you start your practice matters. Finding a few cues to delineate your daily life from formal practice can help you settle into meditation when you are trying to establish consistency. No two people need to have the same cues.

Recently I moved from one part of Boston to another. In the process of moving, everything went into boxes and the boxes went into a remote storage facility. For two months, all my cues for daily practice—my meditation cushion, singing bowl, candles, prayer beads, sacred images—were gone.

I remembered, *Okay, this is an invitation to notice that if you have a body, you have your temple.* But truth be told, as soon as my practice cues were boxed up, I missed them.

A month later, I was surprised at how joyful I was to find my meditation cushion, yoga mat, and prayer beads amid the detritus of the move. The texture of cushion material on my skin, the feel of the beads on my fingers, the stickiness of the mat on my feet...all this grounded me.

We are sensual creatures. Cues such as sound, smell, and visual stimuli can be powerful ways to establish the space of practice.

Finally the time comes to take your seat. Your seat does not need to look a certain way. It might be a cushion on the floor. It might be a bench. It might be a chair. It might be a mound of earth.

In meditation texts of yogic Buddhism, the instruction is simple and practical: “Take a comfortable seat.” In other words, it does not matter what your seat looks like. It matters how you feel. So pay attention to your experiential body when you take your seat. Adjust the seat and your body until you are comfortable.

Once you are seated, consider doing some simple yoga movements or breath work (*prāṇāyāma*) to further delineate the start of your session. In my training, I learned a very simple breath exercise for this purpose called “three cleansing breaths” (these are also described in the appendix, “Four Types of Yogic Breathing”). This exercise is a form of deep exhaling that helps us clear away stale and stuck energy immediately before we practice meditation.

You can try it for yourself right now. Start by inhaling slowly and deeply.

Now exhale slowly, deeply, and fully through both your nose and mouth. To extend the breath, pull back on the root of your tongue. You will notice your breath sounds like the ocean surf heard from a distance.

Toward the end of your exhale, engage your lower abdominal muscles until you have exhaled every last drop of air from your lungs.

Now repeat this breath cycle two more times.

On each exhale, imagine that you are clearing out blockages impeding the flow of energy through your body. These blockages are physical, mental, and emotional.

On each inhale, imagine that you are taking in clean, bright air to nourish your body.

At the end of the third cleansing breath, return to your natural breath.

There is something profound about starting a meditation session with three cleansing breaths. It is a little bit like cleaning house. Everything residual that has followed you to the cushion has an opportunity to flow out on the breath. In its wake, the body’s energy feels clear, settled, and open.

Posture

It is true that meditation can be done anywhere in any bodily position. But as you begin to develop a practice, you soon discover that training in formal meditation posture helps. This is not just a matter of a straight back. It is a process of learning to extend, align, and balance the entire body.

The Sanskrit word for posture is *asana*. Marpa, a yogi and farmer who lived in eleventh-century Tibet, once said, “If you take all the teachings of Buddhism and put them on one half of a scale, and you put the body posture (asana) for meditation on the other half, the scale will tip toward the body’s posture.”

This is a way of saying that the body’s posture in meditation is more important than all other teachings of the dharma. The body’s posture alone can bring everything else into balance. Milarepa, Marpa’s disciple, put it this way:

When the posture is aligned, the energies align.

When the energies align, the mind aligns.

When our posture is upright and aligned, the body’s energies begin to settle and circulate in a way that is balanced. When the energies circulate in balance, the mind too settles into calm and clarity. Posture is not just about perfecting a physical stance. Posture invites the heart and mind into a state of ease.

In general, something can be considered an asana if the body is balanced and aligned, the breath is unimpeded, you are dwelling in the present moment, and you are in a mode of receptivity. True asana could happen while you are standing, lying down to sleep, or while you are making a cup of tea.

But there is a recommended asana for formal sitting practice. The spine is upright and elongated. It does not lean forward, backward, or to either side. The spine is balanced over the hips so that your center of gravity coalesces at the base of the torso. The crown of the head extends toward the sky. The feeling of this posture is straight but not rigid, like a young sapling.

For your body to sustain meditation posture, your hips must be elevated above your knees. This can be easily accomplished by sitting in a chair. Or, if you like, you can sit on a meditation cushion or a meditation bench on the floor.

If you are in a chair, uncross your legs so that the soles of both feet are flat on the floor. If you are on a meditation cushion, try loosely crossing your legs or kneeling with the cushion between your legs.

Rock your body from side to side a few times, and back to front a few times. Find the place where your center of gravity feels centered and balanced over your hips.

Once you have centered your torso, breathe your spine tall. Do this with three deep breaths. On each exhale, feel the spine growing taller, the crown of your head extending toward the sky.

Now tuck in your chin ever so slightly toward your Adam's apple, bringing your neck into alignment with the top of your spine.

Again, take three slow, deep breaths. On each exhale, feel your shoulders dropping and your shoulder blades melting down your back.

Now breathe into your heart area. With every inhale, feel your chest opening and expanding, as if your heart had wings.

Now let your jaw drop and your face relax, as if the muscles of your face were melting.

Allow your eyelids to lower until your eyes are just slightly open. Let your gaze become soft and unfocused.

Your body is now in full meditation asana.

There is also a basic asana for the mind. It goes like this:

Let your attention be relaxed and open.

Do not try to control things.

Do not follow after thoughts.

Do not push thoughts away either.

Be a pure witness of whatever is unfolding.

Once you have settled into asana, it is enough to sustain this stance, this posture of the body and mind. When you feel your energy tightening or your thoughts spinning, you can simply restart, breathing your body tall, relaxing your body and mind, and being a pure witness.

Meditation posture is a stance of great dignity. It calls forth our noblest self. It reminds us that—just as the crown of the head reaches toward the sky and these hips ground us—this body is the confluence of heaven and earth.

Breath

The breath is fundamental to who we are. It connects us to our environment the way no other physical process does. With every inhale, we invite the world into the body. With every exhale, we offer our body to the world.

Learning to connect with your breath may be one of the single most important skills you can develop in a meditation practice. The Buddha taught focusing on the breath as one of the fundamental methods for developing inner peace.

Breath is a powerful anchor for the mind. Anything that moves is stimulating. The breath has a unique ability to draw and capture the mind's attention. As your attention becomes more attuned, the breath becomes more and more interesting. As your attention is drawn into the breath's orbit and begins to focus, you may notice that your conceptual mind calms down. Gradually, the waves of thought just subside.

There may be a scientific explanation for this experience of thought subsiding when we focus on the breath. Neuroscientists have identified multiple distinct networks in the brain—they all work together, but some are involved in certain functions more than others. Some of these networks are associated with the body's sensory and internal functions, and other networks are associated with thinking and self-related processing (including planning, remembering, integrating, perspective taking, and rumination).

The former could be thought of as “embodiment circuitry,” while the latter is often referred to as the “default-mode” circuitry, since it's what our brains tend to do when not actively engaged in anything else.

Scans of the brains of meditators show that when they turn attention inward toward the body or breath, their embodiment circuitry lights up, as if

they were experiencing sensory stimulation. At the very same time, the default-mode circuitry dims, which may be related to reduced conceptual thinking and self-focused experiences such as rumination.

This has important implications for how somatic mindfulness may contribute to well-being. Overstimulation of default-mode circuitry in the brain has been associated with depression and anxiety. Turning attention toward the body may provide a way to loosen and remodel patterns of depression and anxiety by interrupting the cycle of rumination.⁸

Breath practices are some of the simplest and most efficient ways to activate your embodiment circuitry. In the appendix of this book, I have included a description of four types of yogic breathing found in the Tibetan tradition that you might want to try. One of my favorites among these is called “gentle breathing.” This is a practice of letting the breath be exactly as it is while letting attention rest on the sensations of inhaling and exhaling.

PRACTICE

The Gentle Breath

Sit in the posture for meditation. Turn your attention to the breath.

Do you notice how you do not need to make any effort to breathe? How breathing just happens? This is just how it is. *Breath breathes you.*

Notice the sensations of inhale. Your chest expands softly. A bright feeling of the cool air tingles in your nostrils. Notice your body’s natural crest at the top of the inhale, the way an ocean wave pauses at its peak.

Notice the sensations of exhale. Your belly gently falls and relaxes. Notice the gentle feeling of the warm air as it flows from your nostrils. Notice how your body rests at the end of this cycle, like the ocean rests after a wave subsides.

Notice the breath’s rhythm over several cycles. The rise, the fall, the natural pause at the end of the exhale. Instead of “focusing on the breath,” allow yourself to be carried along by the breath’s rhythm as if you were floating on the ocean.

Now explore the microsensations of the breath. Let your attention gather in one of two places, either your nostrils or your diaphragm. Choose one today and one the next time you meditate.

If you choose the nostrils, explore the vibrant sensation in your nostrils as you inhale and exhale. Notice the bright, cool sensation of the inhale and the warm, soft sensation of the exhale. Savor the stillness at the end of the exhale.

If you choose the diaphragm, explore the rise and the fall just below your rib cage. Enjoy the soft, warm feeling of expansion on the inhale and the feeling of release and settling on the exhale.

Allow your attention to be light and alert, but not tight, like the grip of a seagull when it perches on a branch of driftwood.

When you become distracted, as soon as you notice, let the feeling of the breath draw you naturally back, like the ocean's waves naturally draw your eyes when you are on the beach.

Stillness

One of my teachers used to talk about the mind as being like a muddy river. It is moving, sometimes slowly and sometimes rapidly. It is not very clear. When we meditate, it is as if we have plunged a clear vase into the river to draw up water and then placed it on the shore. The vase is our practice of meditation, a clear and stable container.

Eventually, because the vase is unmoving, the sediment in the water begins to settle. At first it becomes semitransparent. By the next day, the water is crystal clear with the sediment having settled to the bottom.

When I first heard this teaching from Kalu Rinpoche, I thought of this verse by the Taoist poet Lao Tzu:

Do you have the patience to wait
till your mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
till the right action arises by itself?⁹

In some ways, meditation is a waiting game. The container of meditation keeps the mind and body still. When we tether the mind to a nonconceptual anchor, the energy of agitation and restlessness begins to gradually settle. Eventually the mind becomes clear and calm like the water left in the pitcher.

Another powerful metaphor for meditation from the Buddhist lineage is the ocean. The body is still and grounded, like the ocean floor. Our breath

risers and falls like the swells on the ocean's surface. Attention, like an anchor, holds us steady, even while thoughts swim around the edges of our mind like schools of fish. Sense experiences swirl around us like the ocean's current.

All of this is somehow perfectly natural.

If you sit this way for some time, you might notice that even though there is movement, there is also a depth out of which these waves of thought arise and into which they also dissolve.

Can you follow a thought while it arises into consciousness and then as it descends to its point of dissolution? Can you sink below the waves and rest in the stillness below thoughts?

Once in a while, you might even try letting go of the anchor of the breath. You might let yourself float, with your awareness open and free. Can you surrender and become one with the great ocean? Do you notice how the waves lapping on the surface are one with the deep, still waters below?

Stillness does not mean that no movement is going on. When you settle into real stillness, thoughts continue to glide through the mind. The breath continues to rise and fall. This is one of the miracles of finding real stillness: it coexists with movement.

Stillness does not mean motionlessness. Stillness means we are not disturbed by movement. It means that we become graceful with whatever is unfolding. It means we are able to remain calm in the middle of a storm.

You cannot force stillness. Stillness descends gradually like the dusk, or like that water settling out in the vase. In some ways, meditation is the art of waiting. You need to keep at it. If you do, eventually stillness will find you.

Blessed Exhaustion

One of the greatest scholar practitioners ever to live in Tibet vividly describes the clearest glimpse he ever had of awakening. It happened when he was just fourteen years old. At that time, he was living in a monastery in

Kham (eastern Tibet) where he had been sent at a young age to pursue his spiritual studies.

At the monastery, he was assigned a personal tutor, a learned old meditation master whose duty it was to oversee the young man's education. One morning, before dawn, the young monk was awakened to a banging on his door. It was his tutor.

"We are going on a hike," the master announced.

The two of them set off walking over the valleys and mountain passes of eastern Tibet. When the sun rose, they reached yet another mountain pass.

The master stopped and turned to his student asking, "Are you tired yet?"

The young monk replied that he was fine to keep going.

The two continued on their way. At midmorning, the master stopped again and asked, "Are you tired yet?"

Once again, the young monk replied that he was okay to continue.

As the sun reached its peak, they reached the top of yet another mountain pass and the master asked, "Are you tired yet?"

The young monk could not hide his fatigue.

"Yes," he replied, "I'm exhausted."

"Aha!" replied the master. "Then you are ready."

The master then invited the young disciple to sit by his side in meditation overlooking the valley below. As he sat by his master, utterly spent in body and mind, the young monk had a clear, undeniable glimpse of the awakening so cherished by his tradition.^{[10](#)}

In some meditation texts, such a glimpse is called "the exhaustion of all concepts." It refers to a pivotal moment when all our schemes, our attempts to manage things, in fact the entire scaffolding of the conceptual mind, just falls apart.

When we are completely spent, such a falling apart happens easily. We may not ever have thought of exhaustion as a blessing, but to be tired—to be completely at the end of our rope—is an opportunity to encounter the nonconceptual. In the gap that is left when our thoughts collapse, there is

clarity—an open, free, unencumbered space that is both fresh and as old as time.

PRACTICE

Blessed Exhaustion

Find an activity that requires sustained physical effort, such as vigorous walking, cycling, hiking, swimming, dancing, or yoga. As you move, let your attention connect to your breathing. Stay with your breathing for the first ten minutes or more of your session.

Now, allow your attention to move to and rest on other sensations. For example, if you are running, focus on the feeling of your feet on the earth. If you are cycling, let your attention rest on the feeling of the wind on your skin. Keep your attention relaxed but focused. Stay with the other sensations for about ten minutes.

Now crescendo your movement so that you exert enough to feel breathless.

When you are starting to experience fatigue, stop suddenly and drop to the ground.

Sit or lie down.

Now just rest in the gap.

Don't try to do anything.

Don't try to create anything.

Don't try to find anything.

Just be.

Touching Base with GROUND

In this chapter, we learned that relaxation is a skill. Just by turning attention to the state of the body, you begin to notice where you hold tension. Just noticing that is enough to allow it to unwind. Between now and tomorrow, while you are standing or walking, and at night before you sleep, encourage your body to relax and find ease. Breathe into the places of your body that are tense and tight. As you exhale, feel tension release on your breath. When you notice your body or mind tightening up, offer yourself this simple instruction: “Relax.” If you are alone, you can speak the word to yourself in a slow, deep voice. Come down into the body as an invitation to enter a state of greater natural ease.

Even though I am suffering, weak, my youth gone,

still I go on,
leaning on a stick,
climbing the mountain.
I threw off my outer robe,
and turned my bowl over,
I sit on a rock and my heart is freed.

—Mettika, one of the Buddha's female disciples, describing her
enlightenment experience

PART TWO

THE SUBTLE BODY

This vajra body
is a path that walks itself
to spontaneous wholeness.
This is the way of natural cause
natural path
and natural fruition.

—Yangonpa Gyaltsen Pal

Opening

O friend, understand: the body
is like the ocean,
rich with hidden treasures.
Open your inmost chamber and light its lamp.
Within the body are gardens,
rare flowers, peacocks, the inner music;
within the body is a lake of bliss,
on it the white soul-swans take their joy.^{[11](#)}
—Mirabai

WHILE GROUNDING AND relaxing are practices of the earth body, opening and untangling—the topics of the next two chapters—are practices of a layer of embodiment called the *subtle body*, or the energy body. The idea of the subtle body is that the body is not just a bag of flesh, blood, and bones. Our physical body is animated by an energy that not only moves through us but actually *moves* us. This energy, which is present constantly, is invisible—hence the word “subtle.” But as we become more sensitive, we begin to experience it as a pervasive kinetic force (moving through the body) or a potential force (ready to move through the body). To encounter the subtle body, we must first expand our understanding of what “body” means.

This is where openness comes in.

Openness is a stance of curiosity and wonder. It does not require that you do anything in particular. It is not a social commitment. It requires only that you find receptivity to what is happening right now, right here, to the panorama and the subtlety of your experience.

You can feel openness in your body. When you invite openness, your breath deepens, your heart expands, your chest lifts. Your shoulders melt down your back. Your belly softens. Your eyes raise. Your face relaxes. You can feel it in your heart and torso, in your face and eyes. Opening is joyful.

To become open in such a way requires courage. But once you have become open, you are safe. Openness is a profound protection because it wraps around things rather than rubs against them. But you have to stay committed to it or it will not protect you.

When you are ruminating or lost in thought, when you are locked in the world of ideas and opinions, you are not in touch with openness. Openness starts with letting go of being hooked on thought. It thrives on being present, in this moment, in this place.

The Subtle Body

The windows of my retreat cabin in New Hampshire overlook a mountain pond. When the sun rises over the pond, the water below glows pink and gold, reflecting the dawn horizon. By midmorning on a clear day, the pond has transitioned into a deep azure. On stormy days, its waters turn steel gray, wind whipping the surface.

The subtle body is like a pond. Similar to the glassy surface of a mountain lake, the subtle body is mirrorlike, spontaneously sensitive. It reflects every mood of your heart and mind, every physical ailment and pleasure. Its ripples are cues to the present state of your humanness.

The subtle body is not purely physical, nor is it purely mental. It is an energetic layer of embodiment that bridges the body and mind. It coexists

with the physical body but is less material, less solid. It coexists with the mind but is more visceral and embodied.

The subtle body is not “subtle” because it is mysterious. It is subtle because it cannot be perceived with our more dominant senses: the eyes, nose, and ears. You cannot see, hear, or smell your subtle body. It is not an idea either: you cannot know the subtle body by just thinking about it or imagining it.

But you can *feel* the subtle body. The subtle body is the vibratory sense of aliveness pervading your body from your head to your toes, as experienced in the present moment.

Aliveness is happening all over your body. It includes the feeling of the air of your skin, the sense of warmth in and through your muscles and veins, your body’s subtle aches, your digestion, your breath. It even includes your mood. But it is not any one of these things in isolation.

To perceive the aliveness as an integral experience, your awareness must be open and relaxed. If you mix your mind with your body like a handful of salt thrown into a glass of warm water, you can feel the subtle body vibrating in your hands, arms, torso, head, legs, feet, and face.

Sometimes one sensation will ascend and burst through this background hum of the feeling layer, like a diver bursts through the surface of the ocean. It will demand your attention—a loud noise, a cold wind, pain.

Sensations are ripples of the subtle body. They come and go. Notice how it is when they pass. The subtle vibratory aliveness remains. Your body is, for want of a better word, humming.

We have a partial equivalent of the subtle body in Western culture—the nervous system. But there is a difference between the nervous system and the subtle body. The nervous system is known to science, which is to say its existence has been documented objectively.

The subtle body, in contrast, is validated by subjective experience. In the esoteric teachings, this dimension of embodiment indeed aligns with the *saṃbhogakāya*, which means “body of experience.” The subtle body is the subjective experience of the nervous system when observed within a deep state of meditative attention. To develop sensitivity to your own nervous

system, some kind of special openness is needed. You need to be ready to host your energy.

It is not uncommon for us to go our entire lives and not notice the visceral all-over aliveness of the body, the feeling of our own sentience. Distracted by appearances outside and rumination within, we miss its quiet symphony.

But the more you pay attention, the more this layer of your being emerges from the background into the foreground of your experience. If you are interested in a path of spiritual evolution, becoming familiar with the subtle body changes everything. By paying attention to this layer of being, this energy field, you can eventually know the oneness of the body and mind.

Interoception

During December of that year in Nepal, I crossed the border into India by way of a packed bus to Bodh Gaya with my mother. We were but two of 100,000 people descending on this small town, the place where the Buddha first attained his enlightenment under the bodhi tree, to attend the event of the decade. The Dalai Lama was giving the weeklong Kalachakra initiation publicly for the first time, and it was all anyone could talk about.

Sitting up front with several dozen Westerners in attendance, we listened as an articulate translator explained the intricate visualizations that we were supposed to do during the initiation. There is just one part of it all I remember. I was encouraged to visualize something called a “seed syllable” in the center of my heart.

The seed syllable, said the Dalai Lama, was endowed with the power of compassion and wisdom. I sat with eyes closed and tried to descend into my own heart. Then I imagined that I opened up my eyes down there to see the graceful intricate strokes of the syllable. No one had ever asked me to *see* into my heart. It was a novel and immediately compelling practice to drop down into the center of my chest with such intention and attention. It was

the most visceral meditation practice I had yet encountered, and it is the first memory I have of feeling the subtle body.

I would soon come to discover that traveling around *inside* the body is one of the characteristics of meditation training, at least in yogic traditions. Such visualization practices are doorways to gradually sensing that the body is much more than flesh and blood. It is a place of pilgrimage where your mind is capable of travel. As your mind starts to travel and settle within the body, you begin to notice energetic shifts and changes. These visualizations, which may seem “visual” at first, are actually an introduction to something visceral, the subtle body. Once you sense the subtle body as a visceral or felt experience, visualization becomes less important.

For some years, I wondered what science might have to say about perception of the subtle body. I now think one of the quietest senses, interoception, may play an important role in our ability to perceive it. Interoception is defined as “the sense of the internal state of the body.” Some interoceptive processes are automatic, but others are conscious. Recent research has suggested that interoception is a human sense faculty that can be cultivated, and that mindfulness practices using bodily foci (such as the breath) are particularly good for this.^{[12](#)}

When we turn our attention to the subtle body, we exercise our faculty of interoception. When we travel inside the body, we cannot help but notice there are microsensations of tightness, warmth, ease, freshness, expansion, contraction, movement, stimulation, arousal. In the language of the subtle body, there is a field of moving energy within. This energy flows, pulses, expands, tightens, pools, and bursts forth at times. Simply noticing that these energy events are happening while they are happening is yogic interoception. The practice of tracking the energetic sensations of the body leads to greater somatic awareness, an ability to attune to internal sensory experiences.

A. D. (Bud) Craig, a neuroscientist who studies interoception, has recognized and described something called “interoceptive awareness,” the sensory process of noticing and appraising signals within the body. Craig

notes that the more evolved our interoceptive awareness, the better our ability to identify and work with emotions.¹³ This makes sense because depression, anxiety, fear, anger, and all our other emotions register as feelings in the body. We cannot work with these difficult emotions unless we first notice that we are experiencing them.

Interestingly, in the tradition of subtle body yoga, the primary method of addressing emotional disorders is not to analyze their origins or address underlying stories but rather to meet them in the subtle body. When you develop an ability to locate depression, anxiety, fear, or anger as a felt experience, you open up the possibility of liberating that energy. The yogic approach is quite different from psychotherapeutic models that target the role of conceptual thinking in regulating states of psychological malaise. The yogic approach encourages interoceptive awareness, which means we learn to notice emotion in the body as a way of turning away from the mind's stories and toward body-focused self-compassion. This yogic approach dovetails with the relatively new area of scientific study that targets the role of interoceptive awareness in emotional regulation.

The Universal Body

I once traveled on pilgrimage to Bhutan. Our group of pilgrims visited a center of the arts in Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan. In the arts center, an entire building was devoted to studios for sacred painting. These paintings are created to assist practitioners in meditation.

The walls were draped with sacred paintings (*thangka*) at various stages of completion. They were all beautiful, but one of them stopped me in my tracks. At first I did not know what I was looking at. The painting seemed to depict a vast landscape of trees, waterfalls, elephants, people, monkeys, mountains, and valleys. It seemed to contain the entire natural world.

But as I stepped farther back, I could see this entire world was contained inside of something larger. As it fell into focus, I saw that all

these beings and their natural landscape were contained inside one enormous body—the body of the Buddha.

When I was in long retreat, we began every yoga session by imagining that our own body is the body of all beings. Before you move or meditate, you can try this. Imagine that—like the body of the Buddha in the thangka—your body contains the whole universe and every being in it.

Then when you breathe, you breathe for all beings. When you move, you move for all beings. When you meditate, you meditate for all beings. You can even vow to become awakened for all beings.

This act of imagination helps reveal your own body as a bridge of compassion. The experience of being in your body bonds you to others. It changes the way you experience your entire practice of meditation. It reframes the self-improvement project as a world-improvement project.

This act of imagination can also transform your relationship to pain and suffering. We tend to think of pain as our own, as unique to us. For that reason, we often feel lonely in our pain. But the real truth is that we have never been alone. Someone somewhere is feeling the very same way you are feeling now. This is human pain. It can connect you to others.

To have such a realization is a profound awakening. In that moment, your heart opens and you feel the universal body. This kind of practice is a kind of alchemy. It can transform pain into compassion.

By the same token, our body's well-being and moments of joy are windows into the human capacity for healing, resilience, and wellness. At these moments, we can offer up our well-being, joy, and freedom. When we offer up these good things, things we may be tempted to keep for ourselves, we feel even better. This is the birth of the body of love.

A practice that begins with this simple act of imagination—*my body is the universal body*—unfolds differently. It is joyful, because you are no longer holding on to this path as your own.

Pathways

Wherever there are channels, both energy currents and wisdom abide there like the sun and sunlight.¹⁴

—Machik Labdron

Around my cabin in New Hampshire, there are footpaths. There is a path that follows the edge of the lake east and then wanders away through a dense hemlock forest to snake up Kidder Brook. There is a path that goes off to the west through mixed deciduous groves before ascending sharply up a steep rugged face of solid granite. There is the overgrown path to the old cemetery.

With every passing month, these paths and their scenery become more familiar. The downed oak here, the Norfolk Island pine saplings there, that garden of mossy stones in the bog. These start to feel like old friends. Perhaps you have paths like this in your life.

The subtle body is a landscape crisscrossed by pathways. These pathways are blazed by energy and by habits of movement, work, play, thought, and emotion. Everything we do, say, and think ripples through the body, leaving traces.

Some of these traces are beloved, familiar, and comfortable, like the paths around my cabin. But some of them are rough and confusing. Traces of joy and suffering.

These traces are how habits and memories live in the body. The cadence of your speech, that inner monologue you catch yourself repeating, your patterns of reactivity, your anxieties, your coffee or tea ritual in the morning.

These are the paths we travel. These are not just habits of thought and feeling but patterns encoded in the body.

With use, the subtle body's pathways become familiar and rutted. Eventually, once a path is well worn, intention plays less of a role. Rather, the pathway you have traveled begins to walk you. It draws you along.

You may even forget that walking this path was once a choice. A time may come when you wish to abandon it to let the ground heal or let the path

lie fallow. A time may come when you decide to forge a new path, a new way of moving, living, eating, or being.

Change is difficult on a well-worn path. You might start with something as simple as resolving to do things differently. But change must soon involve your subtle body, which is where the pattern lives.

In yogic Buddhism, pathways of the subtle body are called *nāḍīs*. *Nāḍīs* are channels for energy. In the subtle body, *nāḍīs* are lines of communication, channels for the movement of energy and intention. They are not solid like bone and sinew. They are supple and malleable. In their real nature, *nāḍīs* exist as potentialities engrained by traces of habit and memory, expressing themselves as energy.

Can you picture your habits as potentialities winding through your body? It is a bit of a relief. You are not moving mountains, you are re-blazing a trail that has the potential to lead anywhere.

In traditional depictions, *nāḍīs* extend all over the body. There are pathways leading from your nostrils to your belly; extending through your arms, legs, hands, and feet; winding through your head. There are pathways radiating from your navel, pathways leading from your eyes to your heart. Everything in the energy body is connected, a web of somatic interdependence.

We are born with *nāḍīs*, but their condition is affected by everything that has ever happened to us in this life. The *nāḍīs* hold our memories. Every trauma you have ever endured is encoded there. Every joyful experience is remembered there. Even enlightened qualities such as wisdom and compassion are encoded in the subtle body.

Prāṇa

In yogic texts, the subtle body is sometimes called the “*prāṇa* body,” because *prāṇa* (subtle energy) is its primary ingredient. The Sanskrit word *prāṇa* means “life force,” and indeed the subtle energy is just this. *Prāṇa* is

the energy that gives rise to the experience of aliveness throughout the body, moving around the body via the network of pathways.

As you become aware of prāṇa, you begin to notice when prāṇa is agitated or calm, bright or sluggish, uplifted or depressed. You notice how the kinds of foods and beverages you consume, exercise, meditation, and good sleep or its lack influence prāṇa, your energy. Another term for prāṇa is *vāyu*, which means “wind.” While the word *wind* can be misleading (there are not literally winds blowing through your body), it is also evocative.

Have you ever stood at the top of a ridge and felt a cool wind blow around you? There is something about wind that uplifts the spirit and wakes us up. Prāṇa can be invited and trained to do the very same thing within your body. Just being aware of the existence of prāṇa accelerates awakening, in the same way feeling the wind blowing around you perks up your mood. Awareness of subtle energy helps you develop the ability to “wake down” as you wake up.

In yogic texts, prāṇa is likened to a horse, and mind is the rider of that horse. The pathways along which prāṇa moves are like the trails along which a horse gallops. This analogy is powerful if you have ever worked with animals or if you consider the conditions of a culture outside of the mechanized world. In such cultures, horses are extremely precious.

Most of my spiritual teachers were born in eastern Tibet. In eastern Tibet, the vast majority of the population are nomadic. Nomads are very close to their horses and yaks. One of my teachers used to describe with great affection his childhood horse with whom he was deeply bonded. This horse would come to the door of his tent every day and nudge it open to lovingly greet him.

So to say that our body’s prāṇa is the horse and the mind the rider is a way to say that the bond between mind and prāṇa is intimate and powerful. In yogic texts, the bond is expressed as being so tight that there is ultimately no differentiating. This is expressed in the single term *energy-wind* or *wind-mind*.

If you have ever ridden a horse, you know that the basis of the bond between horse and rider is trust. To earn a horse's trust, you need to be both firm and kind. You cannot be too controlling. A good rider learns to listen.

Your body's subtle energies also respond to listening. Prāṇa is precious and beloved, but it can also be wild. To work with prāṇa, you need to develop a skillful and caring relationship to your body's subtle energy, in the same way that a rider becomes bonded with their horse.

The Mother Channel

In the yogic traditions, enlightenment is not a mental event. It is not a transcendence of the worldly body either. Enlightenment is a psychophysical event. It is a transformation of a cellular and energetic nature that happens not in the head but deep inside the core of the body.

Extending from the crown of your head to the base of your spine is the largest of all the subtle body's pathways. She is called the uma, "the mother in the center," or the mother channel.

The uma is supple and straight, the color of a deep-blue summer sky. Like all the pathways of the body, it is not solid. It is made of light, of energy.

Somehow, the uma is locatable in the body but its interior is an infinite expanse, like a cloudless sky. It is kind of a paradox, having infinity in our core. We so often think of the body as a temporary home. Perhaps this is what makes mother-channel meditation so powerful. We experience the humanness coexisting with transcendence.

The yogic texts say the mother channel is the place where enlightenment ultimately happens. It is where the restless energy winds gather and dissolve into stillness. This is why connecting to its interior is important. Bringing attention to the mother channel in meditation and yoga can be a powerful way to connect to pure consciousness not as an idea but as a somatic experience.

There is also something healing about mother-channel meditation. We have a long history of relating to the torso as the vessel for our organs. We are very focused on its parts. It is a bit fragmented and instrumental, this relationship we have with the soft tissues.

The mother channel is a pathway of energy connecting the civilized with the sensual. She connects the head with the heart. She connects heaven and earth. She connects the human with the animal.

PRACTICE

Mother-Channel Breathing

Close your eyes and imagine your body is made of energy and light, like a vivid hologram.

Now drop down into the core of your body.

Don't just witness the core. Float down into your core with your consciousness so that you are inside your energy light body.

There, extending from the crown of your head to the base of your spine is a column of light. As you enter the column of light, you encounter an open, endless sky right in the core of your body.

Now, connect to the feeling of your breath.

Breathing through your nostrils, gradually deepen your inhales and exhales.

As you inhale, breathe into the sky-like mother channel in the core of your body.

As you exhale, release the light and space of the mother channel on your outbreath so that it mixes with the space all around you.

Long, slow, deep, gentle inhales. Long slow, deep, gentle exhales.

Continue for about five minutes.

Then rest with your eyes open, heart open, mind open.

Liberation through Motion

The spring of my college year in Nepal, I lived in a Tibetan refugee camp at the base of the Annapurna mountain range where I did fieldwork for my thesis. There I rented a small hut with a dirt floor. It was right on an ancient trail that led deep into the Himalayas, all the way up to the remote kingdom of Mustang. Next door to my hut was a small one-room temple, which was home only to a large prayer wheel.

Early every morning, an old woman would show up at the temple with a key. She would unlock the temple door. Then she would stand in front of the large prayer wheel, fall to her knees, and stretch her entire body out on the ground in a gesture of full prostration. She did this again...and again...and again.

For about two weeks I watched her curiously as I made and drank my tea in the morning. But then one day I found myself leaving my hut and going to stand in the shade of a tree behind her. Peering out from behind the tree, following her lead, I put my hands to my forehead, then to my throat, and then to my heart. I dropped to my knees.

As I stretched my body out in a full prostration, I felt a sense of relief and joy. It was as if all my yearnings had a place to go that was not full of ideas and plans. It felt as if my body had become a prayer.

This was the beginning of a practice that would follow me for decades. Like the sun salutations of Chandra's class, prostrations were a way to practice meditation in motion. In my practice of seated meditation, I often struggled with thinking and doubting. But when I prostrated, I felt as if my conceptual mind relaxed.

I would later learn that bodily motion is crucial to working with the pathways and the subtle energy of prāṇa. Pathways are best cleared and conditioned through movement and breathing. The habits, memories, and traumas lodged in the pathways can sometimes block the flow of energy. These blockages can be cleared with breath, with movement. To keep your subtle body in good condition, your body must move.

Milarepa, a yogi and meditation master in old Tibet, was liberated through motion. After studying the dharma for many years, he decided to go into long retreat in the caves of the wild Himalayan snow mountains to work on his practice of meditation. But before departing, he went to see his teacher, Marpa, who was a farmer. As a parting gift, Marpa gave Milarepa a silver amulet shaped like a mezuzah, inside of which he sealed a scroll.

He told his beloved disciple, "You have my blessings for your retreat in the mountains. However, a time will come when things are hard, and you

will find it difficult to practice meditation. When that time comes, open this amulet.”

Milarepa took the amulet and wound his long black hair around it, rolling it into a bun on the top of his head.

He then traveled deep into the mountains. He meditated there for years in rocky caves and on mountain cliffs. Sometimes he approached nomadic settlements to beg for food. Sometimes he ate only nettles.

There were ups and downs but overall, he made progress in his spiritual development. Then one day he woke up unable to meditate at all. He was out of sorts, weak and exhausted. Day after day he tried remedies to clear up this obstacle, but nothing worked.

Eventually he became discouraged and prepared to give up on his meditation practice. As he prepared to leave retreat, however, he remembered his teacher’s parting words. The amulet on his head! It was the equivalent of finding our “missing” glasses on our nose.

Milarepa unwound his long hair and opened the amulet for the first time. Inside was a scroll of paper. He unrolled it, expecting to find obstacle-clearing prayers and rituals, or perhaps a secret technique of meditation.

Instead, on the paper were illustrations of bodily poses and movements, along with instructions for breathing, stretching, and moving. The scroll contained detailed descriptions of vigorous yoga. It was a recipe for liberation through motion.

After this, Milarepa’s obstacles cleared. He began to integrate the body and movement into his daily practice. Later he declared that the bodily yogas—the parting gift from his teacher—were the key to his enlightenment.

Marpa could foresee this moment would come. Maybe this moment comes for all of us. Milarepa had been missing the body’s moving wisdom.

Body Sādhana

About two years into my first three-year retreat, our teacher came into our compound during the lunch hour. He tossed some rainbow-colored shorts our way. It is time, he said, for *adhisāra*.

At first I was curious, then astonished. I had not known prior to this moment that the Buddhist tradition had a lineage of haṭha yoga. This new practice, *adhisāra* (*trulchor* in Tibetan), turned out to be a fast-paced, vigorous haṭha yoga practice, a *sādhanā* of the body in the lineage of Milarepa.

For the next fifteen months, in the hot and humid summers to the frigid temperatures of January, my fellow retreatants and I gathered every day at 9 a.m. in the outdoor yoga pavilion to train in our rainbow shorts and sports bras. Often the training went on for hours.

This introduction transformed my practice. The perspective we learned in *adhisāra* training is that the body is where and how awakening will happen. The body is the key. Finally, the training that I had started in the rooftop class with Chandra and the beloved Buddhist teachings I had been studying for years began to meld. They were no longer two things.

Adhisāra relies on the wisdom of the subtle body, and it is a way of freeing and maturing the subtle body so that it becomes the crucible of awakening.

In *adhisāra* training, the body is a hearth, and the fire of wisdom burns within. To access that fire does not require exotic knowledge. It does not depend on a specific kind of movement. Rather, it depends on developing a deeply trusting relationship to the body, and it depends on what we do internally while we are moving.

Some things are needed for something to become your body *sādhanā*:

- Intention: set your highest intention for the best outcome for all beings.
- Movement: move your body, enter the flow of movement.
- Challenge: reach an edge state.
- Focus: surrender into the present-moment subtle body without distraction.

- Prāṇa-mind unity: dissolve the separation between prāṇa and mind.

It would be a mistake to think this practice needs to be a certain way, or that the movement you choose needs to be “spiritual.” Any movement can be liberating by virtue of your intention, focus, and aspirations. You don’t necessarily have to start something new to cultivate a body sādhanā. You can start by reframing what you already do to stay in shape.

My body sādhanās include yoga, hiking in the wilderness, jogging, cycling, cross-country skiing, dancing, rock climbing, and swimming. I have friends who take the principles of sādhanā into golf, surfing, tennis, and weightlifting.

Through a body sādhanā we discover that the vow of compassion we make with our mouth and heart is only the beginning. Through movement we can actually experience a deeper form of that vow—we can birth its embodiment.

Body training requires strength, stamina, and focus. When we work the body, prāṇa and mind draw together. Our breath, our energy, and our awareness mingle until there is no separation. That is a bliss state. In one of his songs, Milarepa sings about this practice:

This yoga born from meditative experience...oh joy!

This dance of leaping and running...oh joy!

This state of no-separation is a flow state. The flow state yields concentration, sometimes a concentration superior to that experienced in sitting practice. But because our constricted energy is being spent, our concentration is loose and relaxed. We experience joy because prāṇa loves to move. We experience a waning of conceptual rumination because we are immersed in the body.

This state of no-separation allows us to let go of the sense of self. It allows us to surrender to the body’s natural qualities of presence, aliveness, and joy. It allows us to leave the world of separateness and enter the world

of connectedness. We discover it is actually possible to move with and for all beings.

PRACTICE

Transforming Exercise into Sādhana

Before you begin, pause for a few minutes to sit with your all-over body aliveness. Connect to your subtle body, which is vibrant, energetic, and blissful.

Give rise to the motivation:

My body is the body of all beings.

May I breathe for all beings.

May I move for all beings.

May I become awakened for all beings.

Now begin your routine.

Spend the first third of your routine staying mindful of your breathing. Dissolve the separation between breath and mind.

In the middle of your body session, notice your body's all-over aliveness, your body's subtle energy, or *prāṇa*. When your body moves, *prāṇa* is especially vivid and bright. Dissolve the separation between *prāṇa* and mind.

Spend the last third of your routine releasing all effort. See if you can let the running run you or the swimming swim you—or whatever your activity. Dissolve the separation between body and mind.

Gradually apply the principles of sacred *sādhana* to other forms of movement. Try it when cycling. Try it at the gym. Try it in water.

Suppleness

One of the most important and overlooked cultivations within meditation practice is suppleness, or *praśrabdhi* (pronounced “prashrab-di”). Suppleness is a malleability or flexibility that is both a symptom of freedom and its catalyst. It is characterized by the ability to yield when yielding is needed and to be strong when strength is needed.

When you are supple, you can adapt with ease, and you are not easily unsettled by change. Suppleness is a building block of resilience.

Meditation practice helps us become suppler. By sitting and watching the mind, we soon discover that thoughts and emotions are fleeting. As we

notice this fleeting character, we discover a newfound equanimity toward our own mental and emotional experience. This equanimity makes room for us to dance with the conditions, instead of resisting them.

But yogic Buddhism proposes that suppleness is a wakeful quality that needs cultivating in our entire being. To stabilize and enhance meditative insight, you can and should cultivate suppleness *in your body*. The bending, stretching, and yielding of your body creates a malleability that spreads into your nervous system and mind.

You can work on the suppleness of your body through something as simple as stretching every morning. Leave behind your chair or your sofa. Leave the vertical plane and get down on the ground.

Something good happens when we let ourselves descend to the earth, even if that earth has wall-to-wall carpeting. It reminds us of our life as a child, when the ground was our home, when we rolled around, learned to push up and then to crawl. The ground is primordial.

Now that you are down here, away from business as usual, lie on your back. Stretch your arms over your head, as far as you can. At the same time, stretch out your legs and toes in the opposite direction. Feel your shoulders open. Feel your chest and torso lengthen.

Now come back to a resting pose on your back. Look up at the space above you, not just the ceiling but all that open space. This space is your playground.

Extend one leg straight up toward the ceiling into the space above you. Gently pull your leg toward your torso, keeping it straight or slightly bent. When you find the place where you feel the body's resistance, pause. Take a deep breath. This is your edge.

At first you feel an increase in sensation, something that we all recognize in the experience of stretching. If you stay there for a while, however, the edge yields just slightly. Sensation opens and tightness is released. Hanging out in this edge zone is a profound way to meditate.

With regard to the subtle body, something important is happening while you hang out there. As a muscle stretches, the pathways open and knots

loosen, making room for the flow of energy. That flow flushes out the karmic blockages in the subtle body.

When working the edge, you become familiar with resistance. This is the place where your body does not seem to want to yield. Right here at the edge, where you meet your body's resistance, self-compassion is born.

If you move and stretch with self-compassion, your body and mind gradually become more and more malleable. You cannot force your way to suppleness. Patience and kindness are needed.

Breathe into your edge, relax and immerse yourself in the sensation. Stay here for about a minute. Gently release and let your leg float down to the floor.

Now go through the same steps with your other leg.

After stretching both legs, while you are down on the floor, move around and experiment with other ways of stretching and getting out of your body's usual holding pattern. Or you might take up a discipline of movement that allows for becoming increasingly flexible—yoga, dance, martial arts, or rock climbing, to name just a few examples.

Developing your body's suppleness provides a profound and ongoing allegory for how you can choose to meet your life and meditation practice. You learn how to meet resistance with self-compassion, how to extend beyond the limitations you place upon yourself.

Grace

In retreat, we would periodically demonstrate our yoga postures and routines for our teacher to evaluate. I remember one of these visits. We practiced a routine in unison in our sunny outdoor yoga pavilion, and afterward turned to our teacher for comment. He looked thoughtful and then said, "Yes, the movements are correct." He paused and looked around at our expectant faces. We could feel him searching for the right words. "You learned the routines. But grace is lacking." He used a Tibetan word I had

never heard before: *jingwa*. One of my fellow retreatants asked, “What do you mean by grace?”

“Grace...,” our teacher said. But instead of speaking further, his hands extended toward us. His wrists and palms slowly circled, his fingers floating through an air that had become as thick as honey. Then his fingers interlaced in a mudra, a sacred gesture of the hand.

The movement said everything. Grace is not about appearance. Grace is how effortlessness, ease, and freedom shine through the body.

It happens when you stop trying so hard. This dignified, fluid way of moving cannot be fabricated. But it can be unleashed.

Animals are drenched with grace. The way a tiger moves, the way a sloth moves, the way an eagle dives, the way a dog shakes in the morning. Their movements are effortless and natural. They are already surrendered to the body’s wisdom. It is no accident that many yoga postures are named after animals: the shaking lion, the turtle, the eagle.

The more alienated we have become from our animal self, the more “in the head” we are, the more dormant grace becomes. We can reawaken it by observing the natural world. It is a kind of transmission.

But our meditation practice also has a way of unleashing the body’s dignity. Grace is unlocked by the intimacy of *prāṇa* and mind. When the sense of separation between breath, energy, body, and mind dissolves, the body’s deep dignity and ease spring forth.

PRACTICE

Summoning Grace

Start this practice on the floor, on your hands and knees. You will need some padding under your knees—a folded blanket, for example.

Begin by inhaling slowly, letting your mid back sag while reaching your head and your tail to the sky.

Now exhale slowly, dropping your head and your tail while rounding your back.

Do this three times at a slow, leisurely pace, inhaling as your back sags and exhaling as it arches.

Now begin to circle your hips. To help you get into the spirit of the movement, summon your inner feline (think cat, lion, tiger, cougar, jaguar, puma). Circle in a slow, leisurely way.

Allow your hips to take the lead and let your shoulders, torso, and head follow along.

Move your head this way and that, looking back at your tail from one side and then the other. Look up at the sky. Drop the crown of your head toward the earth.

Take slow, deep breaths as you move.

Keep circling, exploring movement in your torso, hips, shoulders, neck, and head while on your hands and knees for about five minutes. Take slow, deep animal breaths.

At the end, growl, roar, and shake your body all over, like a lion stepping from the river to the shore.

Natural Bliss

After honest examination, I have to admit to a daily undercurrent of rumination and fretting. The fretting is petty. *The color I painted our bedroom is too cool. The backyard plants look haphazard. My hair is dry and brittle.* An endless monologue of petty discontent. Sometimes the monologue is directed at outward conditions, and sometimes it is directed at myself. But rarely does it let up.

The causes of my discontent seem so...well...justified. If you asked, I could explain to you exactly why the shade of gray we chose for the bedroom is too cool, design-wise.

The Buddha called this undercurrent of dissatisfaction *duḥkha*. We want our experience to be just a little bit different than it is.

This is essentially a problem of desire. Underlying all of our wants is a craving for an externalized happiness that does not exist.

The causes of our lasting joy lie within. The Buddha taught that joy is connected to the extinction of craving. When we begin to understand that our life is more than enough, we stop craving the next thing, whatever that might be. When we slow down and stop craving, we find true happiness. It is found in the very decision to let go of the search.

The extinction of craving is not something that lives in the world of ideas. It lives in the energy of the body. As we stop grasping at an illusory happiness outside the self, we begin to contact a natural unconditional joy. This unconditional joy is not conceptual. It is an innate quality of the subtle body.

Ancient scriptures call this innate unconditional joy *mahāsukha*, which means “great bliss.” It sits in contrast to just bliss, which is dependent on conditions. I like to call this innate unconditional joy *natural bliss*, because it is our birthright. It vibrates in the subtle body.

To discover it, we need to discern between passing states of happiness—which come and go—and the natural bliss of the subtle body, which is constant.

PRACTICE

Encountering Natural Bliss

Pay attention to *prāṇa*, this subtle vibratory aliveness of your body. This is the body’s subtle hum of energy that underlies the solid physical sense of your body. At times, the hum is calm and settled. At times, it is punctuated with movement and agitation. However it manifests, saturate your body’s *prāṇa* with your attention until you can no longer tell where your mind ends and this all-over body energy begins.

As you rest with this all-over sense of bodily energy, do you notice a brightness and intensity? Do you notice a subtle bliss that is just a part of being alive? Can you feel it in your heart? Can you feel it in your feet? In your hands? In your face?

See if you can encounter the subtle natural bliss saturating your body, right here, right now. Rest in that with ease, equanimity, and presence.

Touching Base with GROUND

In this chapter, we learned how to open our body and senses. When you are open, you notice energy flowing throughout your body and flowing between your body and the outside world. This is the subtle body that coexists with your physical form. Notice the vibrant wakeful quality of your body’s energy field. When you find yourself closing down into a narrow perception of anything, offer yourself this simple instruction: “Open.” If you are alone, you can speak the word to yourself in a slow, deep voice. Let your body be a support for opening up to the world, your sense experiences, and your inner landscape.

The awakening mind,
caked with dust, resides
within the unmoving;
natural bliss is seen
like a lotus,
in your inmost body.[15](#)

—Kāṇha

Untangling

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all,
For each has been sent as a guest from beyond.¹⁶
—Rumi

AROUND THE PERIPHERY of the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya, India, along a path where pilgrims circumambulate, rose-colored walls of solid stone depict scenes from the Buddha's life, hand-carved in lifelike relief.

My favorite of these is the scene depicting the night before the Buddha's enlightenment, when he was visited by the *māras*, projections of his own delusion, desire, and aversion. The scene depicts the Buddha seated peacefully, surrounded by sensual maidens, ferocious beasts, and furious demons, threatening him with spears and clamoring for his attention.

Something about this scene—the juxtaposition of the swirling vigor and emotion of the *māras* and the insouciance of the Buddha—has always arrested my attention and made me smile. How is it possible to remain

motionless and peaceful, with eyes lowered and a smile on one's face, while threats swirl so close at hand?

This scene from the Buddha's life is a visual teaching. If you sit still and watch your mind, everything that sleeps in your psyche and your memory will come to visit. To meditate will—sooner or later—require you to encounter and deal with every part of the self.

That might not be what most of us have in mind when we first stumble into a zendo or take our first mindfulness class. In the early days of practice, we seek meditation as a refuge, an island away from trouble, a place where we can escape our inner afflictions.

For a while, for months or years even, practice might seem to work this way. It might come to represent a world apart from our daily life, a kind of sanctuary. But eventually the moment arrives when you look down at the island of kapok (our meditation cushion, that is) and realize this is not where you get away from your inner demons. It is where you face them.

If meditation is doing its job, space opens within. In the space opened by practice, every memory and trauma will revisit us, every fear will surface. Our shadow will come out to play. This is not a sign of backsliding. It is a sign the work is beginning.

The subtle body is a powerful field in which to do this work. The subtle body holds our shadow, habits, and emotions. Once you have opened to this subtle body, you can begin to meet your demons not as specters of the mind but as patterns deep within your nervous system.

Appearances

Tilopa, a yogi of ancient India, once gave his disciple Nāropā a very concise teaching intended to be held in the heart. He said,

The mind is not bound by appearances.

The mind is bound by grasping.

O Nāropā, cut through grasping.

“The mind is not bound by appearances” is a radical statement. It means that we are freer than we think.

Ābhāsa, the Sanskrit word for appearance, means quite literally “what appears.” *Ābhāsa* is everything the subjective self experiences, everything that can be seen, heard, smelled, touched, tasted, and felt. In that sense, *ābhāsa* includes everything “out there,” including the conditions of our life.

But *ābhāsa* also includes thoughts, beliefs, memories, intuition, past traumas, habits, and emotion. What arises within the mind and heart is also *ābhāsa*. It includes everything we think of as “in here.”

That person who irritates you at work? They are *ābhāsa*. That endless train of thought cascading through your mind when you try to meditate? That is *ābhāsa*. Chronic illness? *Ābhāsa*. Your fears, joys, hopes, and dreams? Those too are *ābhāsa*. Anything that you can have, are, or will experience is *ābhāsa*. It covers a lot of territory.

When Tilopa said that “the mind is not bound by appearances (*ābhāsa*),” he was saying we are not bound or limited by what happens to us or anyone in our life. He was saying all the things we blame for our unhappiness are not the root of the problem.

The root of unhappiness is grasping. Grasping is an energy of neediness that reaches into the future for its fulfillment. It is a mindset of insufficiency. It is a kind of obsession with *ābhāsa*.

You might think that grasping is the same as attachment, but it is not. Attachment and aversion are human. There is an instinctive being within us that responds spontaneously and naturally to its environment. Our practice should not be to shut down the human.

What Tilopa meant by grasping is the extra layer of energy that we add on to instinct. Grasping lives in the subtle body. It is a second arrow.

Ābhāsa can also mean luminosity or vision. This has to do with the deeper insight into these appearances that seem to be “out there” and “in here.” The deeper insight is that these appearances are a kind of visionary experience. The world is coextensive with the person who experiences it. Appearances, as they arise for the one who knows them, are the play of one’s own consciousness, the light of one’s own awareness.

This is the kind of insight that can emerge when we slow down, sit still, and watch.

At first, it seems as if some of these appearances are coming at us from the outside. Others—the ones that we call thought, feeling, emotion and perception—seem to be coming at us from inside. All of these seem significant for their content. We are distracted by what we see.

But now imagine that you are just born into this moment. You are fresh and have forgotten everything you think you used to know. You have forgotten even how to parcel things into categories and significances. You have even forgotten language.

Sit still for a few minutes and watch what is happening. Notice how, without any effort at all on your part

Breath is breathing.

Heart is beating.

Skin is tingling.

Thoughts are thinking.

Sounds are happening.

Light is radiating.

Your subtle body is humming.

While you are still, the entire world is unfolding spontaneously and effortlessly, like a magical display. See if you can rest in a state of pure wonder. Can you simply witness it all, with no agenda, with no fear, with no need to change a single thing?

Still, everything is unfolding of its own accord. This marvelous, spontaneous display springs out of nowhere, with no effort on your part. It is indescribable. A miraculous unfurling of color, sound, smell, thought, and feeling is happening.

At a certain point you realize what you are really witnessing: this unfurling is the expression of the mind's inherent energy in your subtle body. It has the power to lead you to a state of wonder.

While the display changes, the bright luminous energy behind the display is constant, an ebbing and flowing.

To recognize the splendor of the mind's energy as a constant natural flow helps us let go of grasping to all these things "out there" and "in here." Wonder takes our attention away from the conceptuality (and its subsequent enmeshment). It takes us away from the endless stories. Wonder is a way of seeing things in their present-moment magic. It is a gaze of deep appreciation.

These appearances, once the trigger for grasping, become friends. They might even become the cause of your freedom and release.

An Agriculture of the Soul

Three tall maple trees, a sycamore, and a grand old willow stand behind my house. All of the backyard trees are entwined with English ivy. The ivy climbs up their trunks. It has been growing for decades, and I know that to free these trees will require care and patience.

In the *Mula Sutta (The Root Scripture)*, the Buddha invokes the image of a great, beautiful tree—a sal, a birch, or an aspen. Growing up and around this grand tree, slowly choking its life, are three vines of attachment, aversion, and ignorance. A gardener, the practitioner, comes along.

The gardener does not just cut. The Buddha describes the process of freeing this tree as careful, protracted, and even loving. In my gardening life, I have learned that vines are like this. You cannot just uproot your English ivy. The better strategy is to learn how to work with it over a long period of time.

The tree in this metaphor is appearance, and the ivy the grasping. There is a tree of thought, a tree of emotion, and a tree of conditions. Cutting them down is not a solution. Our thoughts, emotions, and conditions of our life are what make us human.

The task of our practice is to disentangle the grasping mindfully, gradually, and thoroughly. To free the tree of appearance is a long and

careful process, requiring self-observation, self-awareness, and skill. This is where meditation comes in. In meditation, we slow down. We watch the tree. We watch the vines. We learn to discern the difference between what is indigenous and what is invasive.

Then we begin to prune. Our mistake in life is thinking all the vines need to be forcefully uprooted, all at once. It is overwhelming. Pruning is a gradual process. It starts with taking a good long look inside and letting a few things go. Meditation is an agriculture of the soul.

Reflect:

What vines of grasping are wound around my heart, my body, my mind?

What patterns in my life keep me entangled?

What feeds these vines?

How will I start to prune back?

Entanglement

If we practice meditation or yoga, it is important to pay attention to everything that arises, not just the things that we think are “good.” This is important because we can learn so very much from what happens on the cushion or mat: how we encounter what arises in our practice reflects how we are with the conditions of our life.

In everyday life, we are completely caught up by the conditions. Some conditions we like. Those we gravitate toward. Some conditions we don’t like. They are challenging and make us feel uncomfortable. Those we try to avoid. Some conditions don’t seem either threatening or beneficial. Those we leave alone.

In other words, we are not just witnessing the condition of the world or the conditions of our life. We are caught in a push-and-pull with them.

Another way to put this is that we are, for want of a better word, entangled. Entanglement happens before we make a choice. It leads to a habitual tendency to micromanage our experience.

Because entanglement is almost constant, it is not easily noticed. What we notice so much more is the reactivity that bursts through the surface—the irritation when we don't get something we want, for example. Without a gap in the cycle, we do not actually know what it means to be free.

It is a little hard to *see* entanglement at first. But you can *feel* it. You feel entanglement as a pull into the vortex of your opinions, judgments, and beliefs. You feel entanglement as a veil between you and the fresh unfolding of the world around you. In relationship, you feel entanglement as a static that seems to fill the space between you and another person. You feel it in the body as an energy of grasping and avoiding. Entanglement is visceral, encoded in your body.

PRACTICE

Feeling Entanglement

Watch your thoughts for a while. Notice how they surge and subside.

Notice how your mind sticks to and follows some thoughts and sensory stimulation but not others.

Notice how some thoughts lure you in. Notice how you try to push other thoughts away.

Suddenly you are on a train of thought and you are completely swept away from the present moment. You may even forget you are meditating. You become completely entangled in a web of concepts, completely caught up in the story.

Then, at a certain point, it dawns on you...*I am entangled*. It is as if you are suddenly seeing things from high above, seeing yourself from the outside.

Now as soon as this happens, notice: How does entanglement live in your body? What is happening with your muscles? Your shoulders? Your abdomen? Your heart? Your energy? What is going on with your breathing?

Entanglement is an unconscious process. We grasp unconsciously, the grasping becomes conceptual, and our subtle body is suddenly rigid and contracted. But when we pause and notice entanglement and how it lives in our body, as we did in the practice above, the grasping and the swirling thoughts that keep us tightly bound in a prison of our own making self-release. Then there is no need for us to disentangle ourselves from these concepts tendril by tendril.

Thoughts

When I wake up in the morning, there are times when my mind is quiet, but most mornings I awaken to a cascade of thinking. Mostly these are thoughts about the upcoming day—what work needs finishing, what chores need attending to, what emails need answering.

Sometimes I visualize what's about to happen—meditation in my study, grinding coffee, walking the dogs—even before my feet hit the floor. This is an amazing thing about the mind, how thoughts never seem to cease, beginning the moment we awaken.

When you first learn to meditate, you go through a phase of weaning yourself away from your obsession with thought. For a while, this feels necessary in order to maintain your attention on the breath, or whatever it is that you are focusing on.

But eventually you need to bring thoughts into the center of your practice.

But here's the thing: When it comes to thoughts, we are not just thinking. We *believe* our thoughts. We think all their stories are true. This belief keeps us hooked.

Meditation is an act of suspending belief. When you let go of belief, you notice that thoughts are so much more than their content. They are more than ideas.

Thoughts are pure energy. They have a charge and a feeling tone. In the language of yoga, thoughts are prāṇa events.

When we see thoughts in this light, we notice that thoughts are not aberrations of the human condition. They are not the enemy of meditators everywhere. They swirl up out of the body and dissolve back into the body, as natural as breathing. These stirrings of prāṇa are wild, full of vigor, beauty, and lucidity.

You feel this initial tingling of energy as a thought stirs. It rises up like a snow devil (these natural snow tornados are miraculous and arresting if you've ever seen one). It swirls with energy, demanding that you pay attention. It circles up, unwinds, and releases. Again and again.

In this way, you start to find a way to appreciate thoughts without letting them derail your balance.

PRACTICE

Feeling Your Thoughts

Close your eyes and watch your thoughts for a while.

Watch their flow. Notice how thoughts arise and dissolve.

Now inquire: *Can I feel my thoughts?*

See if you can experience the energy of a passing thought. What trace does this thought leave in your body? How does this thought impact your breath?

Feel your thoughts rise up from your subtle body

like waves rise from the ocean,

like clouds form in an open sky,

like snow devils whirl up from a frozen lake in winter,

like ripples dance on a mountain pond.

And then feel how they dissolve back into your subtle body.

Hosting

To disentangle a great tree from invasive vines, a gardener must become intimate with both. We meditators often make a grave mistake in this regard. We want to become intimate with our states of ease and leave our states of dis-ease behind. We want to embrace states of concentration and leave agitation behind. We want to cut down our trees.

We can be forgiven for this. The initial trainings in meditation ask us to return our mind again and again to the breath or some other nonconceptual focus. On a quest to strengthen mindfulness, we label almost everything but attention as “distraction.” For a while this works, but not forever. Eventually the labeling of experience becomes an “othering” that is yet another form of aversion.

Thoughts and feelings are expressions of our mind’s creativity and fertility, and our practice is to appreciate and befriend them. To befriend, we need to develop a nonadversarial relationship to them. As long as we feel

threatened by our thoughts and feelings, or seduced by them, we are entangled.

True “pruning” is to become most intimate with whatever is arising. This intimacy is affectionate and loving, but it is not indulgent. Can you love your thoughts? Can you love your anger? Can you love your fear? To mature as a practitioner is to embrace such a path of intimacy.

To stop and watch appearances with equanimity and curiosity is a sea change. But to become a gracious host of what arises takes a radical shift in perspective.

PRACTICE

Hosting

How are you are feeling? Don’t worry about what you think you *should* be feeling. How are you really feeling?

What emotional or energetic residue has followed you onto the cushion?

To find the emotional residue, go straight into the core of your body and ask, *What’s here?*

Whatever is present—exhaustion, anxiety, grief, worry, anger, self-denigration, irritation, restlessness, resentment, boredom, envy, depression—make room for it.

Breathe space around it. Welcome it.

Become a gracious host.

Knots

Apple trees are special beings. The older they get, the more beautiful and gnarled they become. Apple trees have this twisted, gnarled look because of their abundance of burr knots, gnarly growths that result from small injuries to the tree’s trunk or limbs.

Humans too are gnarled. We have our knots, the places in the self that have been wounded and later hardened over. These places are both rigid and tender. Our knots make us unique.

In the yogic view, these knots are constrictions or blockages in the pathways of the subtle body (the nāḍī). They block the flow of energy

(prāṇa). The knots keep us locked in patterns of thought and behavior.

By looking at an apple tree, you can see where it was once wounded. When you begin to practice more deeply with your body, you too will encounter where you were once wounded. All of your memories are held as patterns of energy.

When moving attention down into your body, there are times when you might find yourself suddenly overtaken. Knots in the subtle body, after all, are how emotions lie dormant. They are awakened by stimuli. Somatic attention can be that kind of stimuli.

When a knot is awakened, you feel it. You experience it as the rearing of something old and familiar, an emotion that has been dormant now surging to life in the present moment. It circulates in your body. Along with it, a memory, perhaps its origin story, springs into conscious awareness. The memory comes in silent pictures. Allow yourself to be present to the images and feelings. Pay loving attention to your knot, feeling it in the subtle body.

If you simply surround the knot with loving attention, it will sometimes just release on its own. This kind of passive release can happen while your body is still—in meditation, for example.

But movement practices are especially helpful for releasing knots. Vigorous movement or exercise can be effective in shaking up and clearing the blockages in our nāḍis. Movement gets prāṇa moving through the body's pathways, and just as snowmelt flushes debris from a river in springtime, prāṇa flushes the debris out of the pathways when we move.

Any vigorous physical exercise can be engaged to release knots in the subtle body, but when engaging movement practice, *intention* plays a key role in the successful release. What do I mean by intention?

Once you have identified and feel into a blockage, you can invite the knot to release deep within your subtle body. This is your *intention to release*. That intention must be accompanied by a willingness to let go into a healthier place. If the intention and the willingness are there, you can then engage with movement and breathing practices while holding intention. The intention itself can guide you into the body's moving wisdom and can guide your body into the state of release.

You can start by trying a very simple Tibetan haṭha yoga exercise, The Shaking *Ha*, that invites knots to release. This movement is based on the way animals move, especially big cats and wolves when they step out of the water. It is called “the shaking ha” because the sound we make while shaking is a long growl that sounds something like *haaaaaa*.

In my long meditation retreats, every exercise routine finished with this movement. Shaking has a way of scattering the energy of knots and resetting the neurological system. It is a great way to conclude your body *sādhana*. Or you can try it in the middle of the day if you need to reboot your system.

PRACTICE

The Shaking *Ha*

Awakening a knot is an opportunity to unleash and release its energy. That moment when a dormant emotion wakes up is critical. It is your chance to intervene, to disrupt the cycle of trauma.

Try this exercise as a way to release pent-up feeling or emotion and disrupt your cycle of reactivity.

Stand up and shake your body all over, like a dog after its bath. Shake your head, your shoulders, your tummy, your arms, your legs, your hips, your hands, and your feet. Shake your face and even your voice and lungs.

As you shake, visualize that all the knots in your system—the stuckness, emotional patterns, obsessions of thought—are breaking up and floating away.

After shaking, return to a state of stillness. Let your gaze be soft.

Notice how your entire body and mind feel free, tingly, and alive. Rest in a state of nonconceptual clarity.

Befriending

Our usual response to the discovery of a difficult feeling within is to strategize how we are going to get away from it. Difficult feelings are like the *māras* that the Buddha faced on the eve of his enlightenment: they seem to be scowling at us, threatening to upend our peace, but actually they are the very thing that will free us.

Our strategies include:

- Avoiding
- Suppressing
- Escaping
- Soothing
- Controlling
- Disengaging
- Fixing
- Indulging

One problem with our strategies is that they are only effective for a while. We might succeed in soothing anxiety for short periods, but it will come back, sometimes even roaring back, if we have not attended to, understood, and respected its deeper roots.

Another problem with our strategies is that they reinforce aversion to the uncomfortable feeling itself. Every time we use a strategy to manipulate a feeling, we further reify the idea that our feelings are worthy only of suppression or exile.

The final problem with our strategies is that they don't work all that well. Struggling with our feelings does not free them. It tends to make them stronger.

Our strategies are predicated on the idea that control leads to liberation. But when it comes to feelings, love is a better path. The path of love is to befriend what is most difficult in ourself.

The idea that we might actually *befriend* the very feelings we have long tried to avoid sounds counterintuitive. At first, it might even sound intimidating. It is like imagining a friendship with the scowling beasts and threatening armies looming over the Buddha's shoulder. *How could I befriend my anger? My fear? My feelings of inadequacy?*

Like everything else on the path of somatic mindfulness, effectiveness is best weighed by trying things, not by thinking about trying them.

Experimenting with a technique of befriending your feelings can help you explore the overall stance.

When you befriend a feeling authentically, in the subtle body, it begins to trust you. It will gradually (over months of practice) show you its origin story, its roots. It will eventually unburden itself. Our feelings wish for acceptance as much as we do.

Feelings almost always come with stories. Usually we listen with complete rapt attention to our stories. But for this practice, we try something different. We ask the story, the conceptual side of ourself, to take a step back. It is best done on the spot, when a feeling happens to drop in for a visit.

PRACTICE

Befriending Feelings

Come down into your body and notice: Where is your feeling manifesting in your physical body? In your subtle body? You might notice contraction, a tightening in your abdomen, a racing heart, sweating, or other manifestations. You might notice a change in energy.

Come alongside the feeling in your subtle body with curiosity and gentleness, as you might come alongside a friend.

Inhale some space around your feeling. Surround this space with a soft, compassionate, witnessing attention.

Now reassure your feeling:

I know in the past I have mistrusted you.

I have labeled you and diagnosed you.

Now, I promise, the time for that has passed.

I will not try to control you. I will not try to fix you, avoid you, suppress you, analyze you, escape you, or indulge you.

I will not try to meditate you away.

You are welcome here, just as you are.

Please remain and practice with me.

Sit and breathe with your feeling. Listen. Befriend.

The Inner Critic

Meditation is an extended pause. When we pause, we begin to notice the inner life much more vividly than ever before. We start to notice our patterns of thought and behavior. We notice our reactivity. We also begin to notice the inner critic.

We are not just experiencing the world. We are commenting on it. This inner monologue is rarely neutral. We weigh, judge, and evaluate everything and everyone that appears in our line of sight. Evolutionary biologists say we are assessing for threat and for alliance. Our survival depends on it.

But this commentary is not only directed to the outside world. A part of us is commenting, in a similar manner, on what it sees inside. There is a commentator judging our thoughts, feelings, intellect, physical condition, mental condition, voice, and body. It is as if our threat monitor has run amok.

This commentator is called, in the psychotherapy world, the *inner critic*. The inner critic is not very compassionate or understanding. No matter how hard we try, no matter how sincere we are in our work and relationships, the inner critic will find fault. It is as if we have an internal commentator standing behind us, just over our shoulder, who judges our daily performance at work and nitpicks at our conversations while we are interacting with other people. And most of the time, we believe this running commentary.

Unfortunately, just because you have started a yoga or meditation practice does not mean the inner critic will now go offline. In fact, as you become more self-aware, as you notice more and more of the world within, your inner critic has more to comment on. *It took just three breaths before you became distracted? Are you kidding me? You are so lazy.* And it is not just your performance that is at stake. It is your identity. *You are never going to become a meditator. You never finish anything you start. You just can't get anything right, can you?*

It is very important to notice when your inner critic is active, or she will undermine your practice. When you hear that strident critical voice, you can challenge the truth of the narrative, asking, “Is that really true?” and “How

do you know that?” and “What makes you think that?” The more you inquire into the stories of your inner critic, the less convincing they become.

But inquiring is not all. You will also need to *befriend* your inner critic. Befriending the inner critic is the best way to disarm her. Befriending is not the same as believing. As you befriend the energy of this internal commentator, you will begin to notice that your inner critic’s energy is not that of logic. It is the energy of feeling in your subtle body. The inner critic has a home in your nervous system.

PRACTICE

Befriending Your Inner Critic

Notice the narrative of your inner critic. This should not be something you force but something that you just keep an eye out for as you go through your day.

When the self-judging, self-critical voice arises, ask your inner critic point-blank, “Is this really true?” and “How do you know?” and even “Who are you?”

As you ask these questions, you may notice your inner critic responds defensively or recoils. Look underneath her bluster for the feeling tone. This is like the inner critic’s secret self. The feeling tone is wordless, usually vulnerable, and may communicate in images rather than words. Follow this straight into your subtle body. Where is the feeling manifesting in your body? Your heart? Your head? Your abdomen?

Come alongside the feeling with curiosity and gentleness, as you might come alongside a friend.

Inhale some space around your feeling. Surround this space with a soft, compassionate, witnessing attention.

You might say to your inner critic’s secret self: *You are welcome here. Let us breathe and practice together.*

Sit and breathe together. Befriend.

Getting Out of Your Comfort Zone

To blaze new trails in the subtle body, we need to get out of our comfort zone now and again. Our comfort zone is a kind of stasis. It is what we are used to, the habitual. The habitual is comforting but it can also constrain us. To wake up, we need to shake up.

When I was a child in the seventies, my father went through a yoga phase. On weekends, he would lay out his big yoga book (*Integral Yoga Hatha* by Swami Satchidananda, if you were wondering) on the living room floor. The book had large black-and-white photos of an Indian yogi with his body contorted into various yoga postures.

We started every session with *prāṇāyāma*, my father showing me, as he peered at the pages of book, how to block each nostril and breathe. With the book between us, we would try various poses. We sat together breathing and still. Sometimes my father would huff and puff with effort, or comment on the difficulty of the pose. I loved these yoga sessions with my father.

I remember one Sunday morning when we were splayed out like this. I must have been about twelve years old. Earlier that morning, I had been working on homework: a book report for school. I had tied myself into a knot of frustration, unable to write.

The yoga session was a welcome relief. Halfway through our hour together, as we untwisted our bodies from half-seated twist pose, the essay unexpectedly came together in my mind. I had not even been thinking about it.

This memory has stayed with me all these years because it was the first time I noticed that disrupting the usual habit of the body could dislodge a blockage in the mind.

I think what I appreciated the most about these sessions with my father was getting out of my comfort zone. For one thing, we were on the floor. For another, we were putting our bodies in completely novel positions. It felt playful and surprisingly good. At the end of these sessions, my body felt renewed and my mind uplifted.

In yogic theory, new ways of breathing, moving, stretching, and positioning your limbs and torso disrupt stale, rigid karmic patterns that are held in the subtle body. As you learn to breathe, move, stretch, and relax in novel ways, rigidity melts and pathways open.

Sacred Dance

In the traditions of Himalayan Buddhism, there is a practice of sacred dance. Some sacred dances are choreographed and performed with music for large audiences.

But another kind of sacred dance, vajra dance, is not choreographed. It arises spontaneously from the subtle body. Traditionally, vajra dance was practiced during sacred communal feasts, when the yogis in attendance surrendered attachment to the self.

When I was in eastern Tibet many years ago, I spent some time living in Kala Rongo, a nunnery at the bottom of an enormous cliff. The nuns there were incredibly kind and loving. But they were also very shy, bashful even.

Even so, when I was there, at the height of a tantric initiation (which was a huge gathering of hundreds of people), three of the nuns suddenly leapt to their feet and started dancing. This was unexpected. When I asked about it later, I was told that this happened from time to time. The locals said this kind of uninhibited behavior—uncharacteristic of these bashful nuns—was a sign of sudden spontaneous awakening. When ego disappears, it is joyful—so joyful you cannot keep yourself from dancing.

Dance can be a deep spiritual practice. It is an easy and safe way to move out of your comfort zone. If you feel awkward just thinking about it, that's a good sign. Dance requires a full commitment of the body, so full that it is impossible not to grapple with your own self-consciousness and anxieties.

In time, however, if you stick with a practice of spontaneous dance, self-consciousness wanes. You need to keep up the practice—trying again and again—until that moment comes.

When your self-consciousness lessens, it is possible to access a feeling of liberation that is precious and unique. In the midst of uninhabited spontaneous movement, an authentic glimpse of selflessness and interdependence can arise.

PRACTICE

Dancing with Prāṇa

Put on some music that you love, a piece that has rhythm, the kind that makes you want to tap your feet or sway. Close your eyes and let the sound wash through you.

Turn your attention to the rhythm. Invite it into the core of your body. Begin with your lower belly, the area right below your navel. How does your body want to move when you let the rhythm into your belly?

Now invite the rhythm into your hips. From there, let it move up into your heart area, your chest, your shoulders, your arms. Let it move down your legs and into your feet. As you invite it into each part of your body, see what happens.

Now try to step out of your own way or, more specifically, let your mindfulness step out of the way. Become mindless and let *bodyfulness* take over.

Surrender to the music, inviting the music to form a relationship with your prāṇa, which is to say with the energy coursing through you.

Prāṇa is not the part of you that manages things. It is the part of you that dances.

The Wisdom of Uncertainty

Right now as I write, the planet is experiencing a global pandemic unlike anything anyone has ever seen. Something called COVID-19, a novel coronavirus, is spreading all over the world.

In the very early days, I would wake up and for the first thirty seconds or so, I forgot that the world had changed. I would feel a sense of security and possibility that—unconscious to me—was our old normal.

The new normal, for human beings, is that life itself is uncertain, and the veil between life and death feels impossibly thin. We do not know precisely how the virus spreads. We do not know who will get it. We do not know who will live and who will die.

Facts are scarce and uncertainty is abundant. It can feel very uncomfortable.

Uncertainty lifts a veil. What makes us most anxious is that we suddenly glimpse a truth: we have never really known what is going to happen next. This is one of the ways we grasp. We grasp after certainty. Perhaps if we knew what was going to happen next, all would be well.

In spiritual life, uncertainty is not a deficit. It is an invitation. A real encounter with the unknown has the potential to release us into a wide-open space of potential. This is a rich and true territory.

Suddenly we notice that—while the next breath is uncertain—this breath is happening. While tomorrow’s life is uncertain, the landscape of our consciousness is unfolding. While the time of our death is unknown, our body’s aliveness is vibrating today. Not knowing what is about to happen is exciting. It is everything.

The Zen masters speak of something called “don’t-know mind.” Knowing, they say, is underrated. When you think you know something, all other possibilities close down. You become rigid.

But when you let go of knowing, things open. The mind stays supple and curious. It lives in the space of inquiry. The Great Not-Knowing is not about rejecting facts. Facts certainly matter. The Great Not-Knowing is about stepping out of the mindset that has closed down on things—certainty is such a mindset. There is hubris in it.

The Great Not-Knowing lives in the subtle body. While the conceptual mind wants more certainty, the nonconceptual body does not need assurances. It thrives in the here and now, living on the edge of attention. This Not-Knowing is a kind of wisdom.

Sometimes I like to imagine my body falling back (metaphorically) into the Great Not-Knowing. This feels like the falling of the body in a trust exercise, except I am doing it with my subtle body, my entire neurological being.

To know may be human, but *to not know* is divine.

Touching Base with GROUND

We live with a valence of feelings simmering underneath the surface of the conscious mind. In this chapter, we learned practices to help us encounter and metabolize feelings. Our subtle body holds these feelings and our history of trauma as knots or blockages. When you notice a knot, you don’t need to know its name. You don’t need to know where it came from. It is enough to notice that you feel uncomfortable or uneasy. Offer yourself this simple instruction: “Untangle.” If you are alone, you can speak the word to

yourself in a slow, deep voice. Come down into your body as an invitation to make room for whatever is present. Befriend your feeling. With time, your feeling might reveal its face and its origin. It might even self-liberate in its own time.

Do you know how experiences shine?
If you don't know how experiences shine,
They're like the sun waking up the night.
You don't need to throw thoughts away—
No ground, just like in a dream
No fixation, like a water moon
Nothing really there, like a rainbow
Directionless, like the open sky
That is how experiences shine.^{[17](#)}

—Milarepa

PART THREE

THE TRUTH BODY

From the sky-like truth body,
Rainbow form bodies unfurl.
Intuitively,
everything is known;
Natural freedom,
Spontaneous presence.

—Niguma

7

Nurturing

Know that I live
in the body of mind
and the field of the senses.
The twelve kinds of matter
are only my bones and my skin.
We are not two, yet you look for me outside;
When you find me within yourself,
your own naked mind,
that single awareness
will fill all worlds.^{[18](#)}
—Yeshe Tsogyal

ONE OF THE assumptions I long carried with me is that I am not good enough as I am. As a result, for many years I operated under the notion that meditation would fix me and make me a better, more peaceful person. Many of us carry this notion deep down; we tend to come to the spiritual path wanting to make our lives and ourselves better.

In other words, when we embark on a project of meditation, we do so with a belief that it will lead us to a future state of peace. But eventually we discover that the goal cannot be a future peace. While the aspiration to

attain inner peace or to be free from suffering may seem perfectly natural, there is a subtle kind of violence—and also a deep misunderstanding—in the notion that we are not sufficient as we are.

The reason the goal of meditation cannot be a future peace is that the peace we seek is not up ahead somewhere, in some future time. It is not even right around the corner, in some future hour. The peace we seek is already present. Our innermost being is already aware, clear, and unwavering. Not someday but right now.

This fully wise, awake aspect of the self goes by many names. I think the idea exists, in one form or another, in many esoteric traditions. In some Tibetan lineages, this awake aspect of the self is called “awareness” (*rigpa*). Awareness is not a state. It is the essence of who we are. It is the clarity, spaciousness, and compassion of our innermost being.

Now, one might think that awareness must be aware of something. But awareness—as meditation masters explain it—is not aware *of* anything, which is to say it is not aware in a dualistic way. It is too simple and spacious to be constrained by one particular “something” that it locks down on at the exclusion of other things. This part of our being is panoramic, taking it all in with equanimity.

This awareness is also not constrained by a sense of itself, a someone who is being aware. It has no sense of fixed identity. It is an empty selfless awareness. It remains grounded in every moment of experience, not separate from what it sees. It is a selfless, nondual watcher. It is completely ordinary and present in the now.

Because awareness is stable in this way, distraction cannot cause it to deteriorate. Mindfulness cannot improve it. Awareness is what it is. It cannot be conditioned or trained. We can, however, nurture a relationship with it.

When we first sit on the cushion, we may have trouble believing there is anything of that sort in our chaotic mind full of churning thoughts and feelings. But as we sit more and more, eventually we discover that a very subtle, quiet consciousness is watching the chaos. This quiet consciousness

is a witness that is not thrown off by the chaos of the relative mind. It is also not separate from the chaos either. Awareness permeates everything.

The Body of Truth

When you hear the word *awareness*, the body might not be the first thing that comes to mind. Rather, you might think of something more refined than the flesh. You might think of the brain, and words such as *knowing* or *perceiving*. Awareness would seem to be something that is separate from this flesh-and-blood body, or even from the subtle body.

But in yogic Buddhism, awareness is a kind of body.

It is a body that is birthless, deathless, and boundless. Traditional sources call it “the body of truth,” or *dharmakāya*. *Dharma*, the first half of the compound, means “truth.” *Kāya*, the second half of the word, means “body.” *Dharmakāya* means “the body of truth” or perhaps “truth embodied.” It is a body of truth in that it is more reliable than illusory appearances that arise, abide, and then pass away. Yet it is not really separate from those illusory appearances either. The body of truth is the *nature* of those appearances, the nature of ābhāsa.

While we are alive, this body of truth is not separate from the physical or subtle body. It is the layer of embodiment that pervades our physical and energetic being with a sense of conscious awareness. It provides our earthly experience with a sense of cognizance. Yet it is not exactly mind. Mind is this restless, moving, fertile thing that is producing thoughts. Mind is actually the part of the subtle body that grasps at objects. It is the part of us that becomes entangled.

You can train the mind to be more attentive, but awareness is already attentive. It is a part of the self that is a steady, unencumbered wakefulness. Awareness lives in the now. It is just knowing, just seeing, just experiencing. It lives in a primordial first moment of perception, before the world splits off from the one who sees it. Just as truth endures, the *dharmakāya* endures in this moment eternally.

In yogic texts, this part of our being is sometimes called the “subtlest” layer of the human form. While the earth body is “coarse” and the prāṇa body is “subtle,” the body of truth is “subtlest.” It is so subtle that we overlook it. We are distracted by appearances, by the parade of the thinking mind. Awareness is more like the wide-open space the parade is marching through, the part we miss because it is so vast and intangible. To see awareness vividly, we need to look deeply within, again and again. We need to commit to a path of ongoing insight.

While awareness is spacious, it is not somewhere up in the clouds. It is not even above the neckline. Awareness, in yogic understanding, is embodied. It saturates every breath, every cell, and every surge of emotion. It pervades every corner of our living experience. It extends throughout emotional, physical, energetic, and mental life.

Awareness is not even merely embodied. It is enworlded. This sacred consciousness is coextensive with whatever it perceives, including the natural world, with others around us. In recent years, a similar perspective has emerged within the field of cognitive science called “4E cognition,” which has been adapted by the philosopher Evan Thompson for understanding mindfulness. It posits that mind is formed and structured by our brain, body, and the physical and social environments all around us. In this theory, awareness could be understood to extend *even beyond the body*.¹⁹ This idea may sound mystical, but it resonates for many meditators. The more intimate you become with your awareness, the more you experience its limitlessness.

PRACTICE

The One Who Is Aware

Sit for a while and settle.

Start by watching your breath.

Now, after a while, consider:

Who or what is watching my breath? Who is aware?

This “one who is aware,” where is it?

Is this one in my eyes? My ears? My skin? My torso? My hands? My feet? My breath?

Is this one outside my body? Inside my body?

Self-Settling

When you first start meditation or yoga, you want to do things right. If you happen to be an overachiever, you might bring perfectionism right into the practice. If you have issues of inadequacy, these too will follow you into your spiritual life.

You can invest a lot of energy trying to build the perfect practice. Or you might try to make up for your perceived deficits by being “good” at meditating.

But here’s the thing—in the end, meditation is not a construction project. It is a practice of *deconstruction*. Meditation requires letting go of habitual modes of fixing and perfecting. We are accepting that this moment of experience is perfect as it is.

Letting go of the construction project takes trust. We need to trust the potential of our being to find its way home. Instead of trying to settle down, try inviting the body to settle itself. Likewise, try inviting the breath and mind to settle themselves.

It sounds like a subtle distinction, between settling and letting something settle. But it is a huge difference in practice. It is the difference between following a path of doing and following a path of allowing. These are two different paths.

As one of my teachers once put it, “If you leave the mind alone, it finds its way.” He meant that if you leave the wild and thinking mind alone, you can trust it to return to its natural state—wakefulness itself.

There is a very special practice that was transmitted by one of the great female Indian masters of early Buddhism, Niguma. She taught a practice called The Three Self-Settlings or The Three Naturals. It is a practice of letting it all be.

PRACTICE

The Three Naturals

Of the three self-settlings, or three naturals, the first is natural body. Let your body settle into its own place. Let it be just as it is.

Second is natural breath. Let your breath settle into its own natural rhythm. Let it breathe you.

Third is natural mind. Leave the mind alone. Let it wander where it will, like a bird set free from the prow of a ship. Trust it to find its way back home.

Nondoing

Awareness in its simplest form cannot be cultivated. But it can be nurtured.

You might think that to nurture awareness, you need to do something. But actually, the very best way to nurture awareness is to do absolutely nothing. When we let go of the doing project, awareness slowly moves from the background of our experience to the foreground. She comes out of hiding.

Doing nothing sounds easy, right? It is much harder than you think. Keeping busy is a strong habit. When we first sit to meditate, we fidget. We want to spring up off the cushion to answer the email or soak the brown rice. At the very least, we want to follow our thoughts.

It is incredibly tempting and seductive, this doing-mind. But if you really want to get this meditation thing down, it is important to resist and, just once in your life, let the doing go. You need—at times—to be able to let all your ambition and plans dissolve.

When you do, at first you will experience this delectable sense of relief. It is as if the gods (the gods being you) have finally given you permission to stop spinning and start living.

Nondoing is incredibly rich. When you stop doing, you enter a new world. The new world is a state of just being, without one single agenda. Not being *something* or *someone*, but just being. It is also an old world, because you knew this as a child. Children know how to just be.

You can try taking this into your meditation practice. It can become your main practice if it appeals to you.

In this new world of just being, all kinds of unexpected things unfold. You were so busy doing, you did not notice what was going on outside your window. You did not notice how the light falls on your desk. But mostly you did not notice what was going on within.

Entering the world of nondoing is like when you hike for many miles in the woods and then suddenly stop. The woods come alive and you can hear the whisper of the wind high in the treetops.

When you practice nondoing, pure being comes alive. In the space of pure being, you can hear the quiet whisper of this very subtle natural awareness.

PRACTICE

As It Is

Right now, enter the spirit of nondoing. You have permission, total and complete, to do nothing.

Do not plan or strategize what is going to happen next.

Do not try to control your mind.

Do not try to fix anything or make things better.

Do not sit a certain way.

Instead, just let everything be, exactly as it is. Let all the people out there, wherever they are, be just as they are. Let yourself be, just as you are.

The Power of Presence

When I was a girl, my family sometimes spent summers on a rustic ranch in Montana. There was no electricity and no running water. There were only woodstoves for heat. It was blissful.

The ranch belonged to my father's friend Chedayne. She lived on the ranch with her dogs and horses. Her two teenage sons came and went. Deayne, as we called her, had a way about her that I can only describe as authentic.

I remember noticing as a child how adults seemed to be so wrapped up in themselves. But with Deayne, she seemed to be so *there*. When I say she was “there,” I mean she was present in the moment with whatever was happening and whoever was there. I could feel it. It was a kind of transmission.

There is this saying that actions matter more than words. I would argue that our presence may matter at least as much as our actions. Presence is powerful. And it is a gift to others.

Meditation and yoga are cultivations of presence. Presence is a sense of being here, now. To cultivate presence, we need to let go of ruminating on the past and anticipating the future. We learn to find the immediacy of the radical present.

The radical present is slightly different from the present. The present lives between the past and future. It is bounded. But the radical present is experienced when we actually fall into Now. It has no reference point. When you are really here and now, there is nothing else.

You can feel the radical present as a lifting of a fog. You did not know you were in the fog until you became present. To land there is so humbling because you immediately understand how much of your life you have missed.

When you land in the radical present, the bodymind feels completely different. There is a settling of the prāṇa, a balancing of the winds in the body. You realize you have been sleeping. Now you feel completely and truly alive.

This is not something that can be understood by thinking about it. You have to land there. You have to cultivate Now.

PRACTICE

The Radical Now

Let go of thinking about the past.

Let go of anticipating the future.

Let go of following after anything in the present.

Rest in the radical Now.

Mind the Gap

Meditation can be as simple as watching your experiences flow. By learning how not to stick to what's happening, you are doing deep work. By learning to not avoid, that too is deep work. This is so much of the training.

These ways of watching teach us equanimity. You learn how to become a steady, nonreactive presence to what is happening in your own mind. You learn how to be accepting of states of restlessness and calm, states of sleepiness and alertness, sounds that are irritating and pleasant. You learn to take things in stride.

These ways of watching also teach how to release grasping. You begin to notice how much you cling to your own thoughts and experiences, and you slowly notice that you can do the opposite: let go. Following after this and that is a choice. Letting go is another choice.

As you discover equanimity and letting go, you become less distracted by the content of what you are thinking and more interested in the energy and texture of thought. Because you are no longer at the mercy of thought, thought itself can gradually become the focus of your meditation.

Thoughts have a dreamlike quality. Have you ever noticed that you cannot remember exactly when a dream begins? You wake up inside the dream and you are flying, or you are watching a tidal wave crash around you. But it is not like a movie in which you remember exactly how you got there.

Thoughts are like this. Suddenly you are thinking, but if you try to find the exact moment when and where a specific train of thought began, you cannot find the first moment.

But something profound happens when you try. You notice a gap. Once in a while, you fall into the gap between thoughts. A thought's birthplace is hard to grasp because it is ungraspable. In the gap, there is only space.

Sometimes try following a thought to its point of dissolution. In the moment just after your last thought has ceased and before the next thought

has arisen, there is openness and light. This is a state of nonconceptuality. It is completely indescribable. It is as if someone opened a trapdoor and you can see the sky.

PRACTICE

Mind the Gap

Witness your thoughts in a relaxed way, with no agenda, for a short time.

Then pick a thought and follow it all the way to its point of dissolution.

Rest in the gap between thoughts.

Open the trapdoor and fall through.

Stay as long as you can.

Mind the gap.

Sky-Like Awareness

Before Buddhism came to Tibet, people worshipped a god named Pehar. Pehar did not live in the sky. Pehar *was* the sky. If you have ever been to Tibet, this seems perfectly understandable. The sky is a stunningly vast presence that dominates the landscape. It is godlike in its grandeur.

In the yogic teachings, *rigpa*, or awareness, is often compared to the sky. Awareness, like the sky, is vast. If you just look at your experience of the present moment, you sometimes encounter this vastness. When you search for a place where this experience of the present moment ends and something else begins, it is hard to find.

Like the sky, awareness is luminous. There is an intelligence or a brightness to our conscious existence. Even if you put yourself in a dark room and plug all the holes where the light is getting in, your awareness would not go dark.

Like the sky, awareness is spacious. Have you ever noticed that there is a space in which your thoughts, feelings, and sense experiences unfold? If space were not present in our conscious experience, nothing else could be either.

Just as the sky is not harmed by the clouds that float through it, awareness itself is not damaged by the thoughts, memories, and feelings that move through it. It is resilient and capable of handling what arrives.

Finally, the sky has no sense of self. It has no agenda. This is true for awareness. Your awareness does not think, “I will now be aware.” It just is. It is aware spontaneously, like a candle that never needs to be lit.

These sky-like qualities are within you. Meditation is a way to explore this part of yourself that is naturally spacious, luminous, resilient, and egoless.

Many traditional teachings encourage finding the sky’s qualities within your mind, pointing these out as “the nature of mind.”

However, there are other places to look. The sky itself (yes, the one up there) is a fantastic teacher of the nature of awareness. You can try gazing into it, as you did sometimes when you lay on your back outdoors as a child. The sky can point out awareness to you.

But the body too can point out the nature of awareness. Like space, awareness is not entirely separate from what it hosts. Sky does not end when it touches the horizon. This thing we call “sky” lives in the molecules of our body. Without sky, there would be no matter, movement, or breath.

PRACTICE

The Sky Body

Find a place in your home or outside where you can gaze at the sky.

Ideally, lie on your back or recline, so that you can fully relax your body.

(Wear sunglasses, to avoid glare!)

With a relaxed mind, turn your gaze to the open sky. Let go into the vast openness above you.

Feel the sky mingling with your eyes, your mind, your heart.

Feel the sky mingling with your energy.

Feel the sky mingling with your body.

Let the sky meditate you.

The Loving Witness

One of my teachers compared the thinking mind to a child and awareness to a venerable old sage. The child and the sage coexist and comeingle, but we are distracted by the antics of the child. Our entire path is to see through the eyes of the old sage while having compassion for the child.

We all have a venerable old sage within. It can help to remember that when our mind is restless or bored in meditation. Instead of escaping the situation, we can situate ourselves in a gaze. Then we can turn attention right to the restless mind. We can watch the thoughts with affection. As one meditation scripture says, watch your thoughts...

Like a parent watching her children play,
Like a shepherd watching sheep,
Like a child watching clouds pass through an open sky,
Like a farmer watching the rain fall.

In these ways of witnessing, we are not judging. When a shepherd watches his sheep, he is vigilant but not judgmental. Nor are we adopting the clinical stare of an impartial observer. When a parent watches her children play, she is warm rather than impartial. Nor is our witnessing dull. When a child watches clouds pass through the sky, they are interested rather than bored.

These ways of witnessing are attentive, interested, intimate, and loving. The mother loves her children in all their uniqueness. The shepherd is vigilant but relaxed. The child is full of wonder. The farmer, grateful.

When you meditate, you are discovering new ways to gaze on your experience. At first, these ways of gazing are like trying on new glasses. Objects appear changed.

A thought that once bothered you is now cute, playing through the space of your awareness. A feeling of depression is now a cloud passing. A sound that irritated you is now rain on a dry field. The quiet of the meditation space, once boring, is now fascinating. First, you learn to radically tolerate yourself. Later, by extension, you learn to tolerate the world around you.

In one sense, you seem to be watching. But these instructions, they are not really just about the eyes. They are about *embodying*. The parent is fully a parent. The farmer is fully a farmer. They are not part-time. The way they gaze is not about how they see but how they are.

Awareness already gazes like this. Awareness is a loving witness, the venerable and compassionate sage. There is a part of you that holds this open, loving, tolerant view of everything. But you are not just trying to get on board with this view. The practice of meditation is to embody this as a way of being. If you listen closely, it is calling you home.

PRACTICE

The Loving Witness

Watch the array of what is unfolding in this present moment. Observe what is happening in your inner and outer world. See if you can be with your experience like

A parent watching their children play,
A shepherd watching their sheep,
A child watching clouds overhead on a summer day,
A farmer in a field watching a gentle rain,
A venerable old sage watching the world go by.

Can you sense the loving witness in your body?

While being this way, eventually a thought or sound or feeling will grab your attention and pull you away.

As soon as you notice, return. Come home to the gaze of the loving witness.

Touching Base with GROUND

In this chapter, we learned to encounter the body of truth, the pristine awareness that witnesses all things but is not separate from them. At any moment, you can turn toward this awareness as the loving witness of everything and see through her eyes. This body of truth, which is like a cloudless sky, cannot be made better by any technique or be made worse by neglect. But it can be nurtured. When you notice yourself lost in rumination and caught by the tyranny of thought, surrender to your own naturally present wakeful awareness. Offer yourself this simple instruction:

“Nurture.” If you are alone, you can speak the word to yourself in a slow, deep voice. Come down into the body as an invitation to experience your infinite sky-like nature, your own innate awareness.

Don't meditate! Don't meditate! Don't meditate with your mind!
This mental meditation is just more thinking,
keeping you stuck in existence.
Release from within
and you will be free.
—Sukhasiddhi

Dissolving

Body and mind are not separate in buddha dharma.

This being so, they are also called body-mind.[20](#)

—Dogen

BACK IN THOSE formative days in Nepal, I had a kind of adopted grandmother. She had recently taken the vows of a nun, intending to dedicate the rest of her life to devotion and prayer. She spent every morning circumambulating the great stupa near our little apartment.

Mola, as I called her, with her shaved head and burgundy robes, looked radiant to me. I imagined she knew the secrets of enlightenment. So one day, I took a chance, and I asked her if she would give me some instruction in meditation. She gazed at me with her wizened eyes, blue with cataracts, and smiled.

She set her prayer wheel down and said, “I will think about it.” As she spoke, she raised her right hand and it came to rest on her heart.

At the time, I worried what it meant. Maybe I was not qualified to receive instruction. Maybe I had asked too soon. Little did I know, Mola had already imparted the teaching.

Not long after that, I asked a friend who was more culturally literate than me what Mola might have meant. “Oh, didn’t you know?” my friend asked rhetorically. “Hereabouts, the heart is what ponders.”

In Nepal, it often felt to me as if the head and the heart were closer together than in my home country. I do not know if it was true. But in Buddhist understanding, the highest expression of wakefulness is an integration of wisdom and compassion, a kind of joining of the discernment of the head and the love in the heart.

In the yogic teachings, the union of wisdom and compassion takes the form of an integration of our embodied layers. In an ultimate sense, the earth body, the subtle body, and the truth body are not really three separate bodies. When this truth is realized, a fourth dimension of embodiment—the “body of integration,” or *svabhāvikakāya*—emerges.

This “body” is not always included in the three-kāya schema because it is the realization of nonduality itself. Svabhāvikakāya, in the esoteric yogic sense, is the dissolving of boundaries between the physical and the energetic, between the physical and the emotional, between body and mind. When those boundaries dissolve, we are left with a blissful nonconceptual wholeness that is the essence of enlightenment.

The body of integration does not feel divided within itself or separate from the world. This body does not need to go somewhere else to awaken. Like the layered three bodies, there is an aspect of the body of integration that responds to training. But the body of integration is also primordially present as the truth of who we are, the truth of our belonging.

The Sense of Separateness

Have you ever been in a room full of people and still felt completely alone? A sense of separateness is something that runs deep in the human psyche. It does not have to do with the conditions. It is existential. We believe there is a divide between the self and what the self experiences.

The Buddha pointed out that this sense of separateness is related to our belief in the self, a belief so deeply rooted that we never question it. How often do we sit down and think, *What exactly do I mean when I say my self?*

When you look deeply into it, the “self” is not as easy to find as you might think. At first blush, you might notice a sense of “I” that exists in this present moment. This sense of self is like a feeling that you exist. But then there is also a complex and multifaceted sense of identity. There is your name, your job, your relationships, your thoughts, your ideas and opinions, your body...this all seems to be a part of the self. On the most basic level, there seems to be a consciousness that knows and sees.

There is a *sense* of “I” and “me,” but the more you examine this, the more it falls apart. In one of his teachings, the Buddha compared the self to a chariot. A chariot functions, but if you look closely, there is no one thing that is “chariot.” It is made up of parts. In the same way, there is no one single entity that is the “self.” It too is made up of parts.

When the Buddha taught selflessness (*anātman*), he did not mean there is no self at all. It is really important to understand this, because if we decide there is not self, we risk denigrating what is present, and much is present.

He meant that the self is not at all what we think.

He meant that the self does not exist as one single “thing,” and it does not exist in isolation. Something exists, but that something is a construction. It is a fiber in the web of all of life. The self is interwoven with its world. Every breath we take is an exhale from the trees around us. When we consider deeply, separateness is an illusion.

But the illusion of separateness is a powerful one. It keeps us operating on the level of self-interest. And it also causes us suffering. The sense of separateness feeds loneliness, fear, aversion, and grasping. It is not an illusion that generally serves us well.

Interbeing

Reflection on interbeing (*pratītya-samutpāda*) helps dissolve the illusion of separateness. *Interbeing*, a word coined by the Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, is the truth that nothing stands alone, that everything interweaves

with everything else. Everything inter-is. Interbeing can be seen when we slow down enough to observe any part of our human experience.

The body demonstrates interbeing with every breath. With every inhale, we take the outbreath of trees into our bodies. With every exhale, a part of us joins the earth. We cannot live for a single moment without the constant exchange between our bodies and the natural world.

Relationships with others help us experience interbeing. When we see a friend's tears, our heart is moved because we understand intuitively that their pain and ours have sameness.

Just understanding interbeing is not something that can fully dissolve the illusion of separateness. It certainly helps, but we need to do more than that. We need to integrate the understanding of interbeing into the body. We need to *feel* interbeing to dissolve the illusion of separateness. That is because delusions, like emotions, live in the subtle body.

Meditation and yoga are all about feeling interbeing. These practices deepen our connectedness to our own mind and body. We learn to interbe gracefully with the self. We also learn that there is no place where our consciousness ends and the world begins. This gradually dissolves the illusion of separateness and awakens the truth of intimacy, the truth that we are all connected. Not only are we connected with one another but we are interdependent with the natural world.

This dissolution is not a conceptual one. We are not thinking or philosophizing ourselves into the truth of interdependence. We are doing something much deeper. We are living into the possibility of embodying intimacy in our body, breath, and mind.

PRACTICE

Interbeing

Can you interbe with sound? To interbe with sound, dissolve into hearing.

Can you interbe with what you are seeing? To interbe with appearances, view things as not "out there" and the seer as not "in here."

Can you interbe with the rain falling on your roof, with the wind in the trees?

Can you interbe with the traffic outside your window?

Can you interbe with your body? To interbe with your body, dissolve into your subtle body.

Can you interbe with your mind? To interbe with your mind, be a gracious host of every thought and feeling.

The Wisdom of Intimacy

One summer, I attended the Mind and Life Research Institute in Garrison, New York. Many scientists, scholars, and graduate students, as well as a few of us Buddhist teachers, were there. At lunch one day in the dining hall, I sat next to a social scientist. This man had spent his entire career studying the relationship between social connection and human happiness.

When he learned about my background in the practices of Buddhism, especially the kind practiced in the Himalayan region, he said, “I hear there are yogis in the caves of the Himalayas who spend decades in solitary retreat. I don’t understand this. As a social scientist, with all we know about social connection and its relationship to happiness, it would be my prediction that all mountain yogis should be miserable. Yet reports are that some of them are enlightened. I would literally go insane if I had to be alone for even one month.”

My response: “Maybe they would too.”

How does one explain that yogis in solitude are not alone? Meditation is a relational practice. In the end, the yogis in their mountain caves are working toward one thing and that is *advaya-jñāna*, which means “the wisdom of intimacy.” This word might, more than any other, capture the essence of the fruit of spiritual practice, at least in some yogic traditions.

Advaya, the first part of this compound word, means “nondual.” More literally, it means “not two.” Now, this term would be meaningless if there were not—at some point—two.

Before we have seen awareness, we live in this world of self and other, subject and object, a world of “two.” Caught by that sense of separateness, we do not see the oneness of things. Advaya nods to this conventional duality, the world in which we live, the illusion of separateness.

Once in a while, however, by accident or by design, we land in the world of one. Somehow the veil between self and world is perforated and we see the indescribable unity of things. Advaya alludes to that experience.

The second half of the *compound*, *jñāna*, refers to a deep, timeless wisdom, something ageless and innate—the wakeful gaze inherent in everyone’s consciousness. Consciousness, in Buddhist belief, is already wise, not as a future possibility but right now at this very moment.

So advaya-jñāna means an innate and timeless wisdom that is not dualistic, or intimate wisdom.

Somatic Nonduality

This sense of separateness, it seems to follow us everywhere, even into our interior life. Not only do we experience the sense of separateness between self and world but also as an internal separateness—the separation between mind and body, body and breath, mind and heart, thoughts and emotions.

In yogic traditions, advaya-jñāna has more than an ontological significance. It is not only a wisdom that realizes the nonduality of self and world. It is also not a wisdom sequestered in the mind. Advaya-jñāna is a wisdom that realizes nonseparation, wholeness, within the human organism.

The medieval Zen poet Eisai and the great Zen master Dogen called this kind of organic wholeness *shinjin ichinyo*, “the oneness of the bodymind.” Yangongpa Gyaltsen Pal of the Tibetan tradition called it *lusem yerme* (Skt. *kāyacitta-abheda*), “the inseparability of the body and mind.” They were describing a somatic nonduality, a complete and utter inseparability between conscious awareness and the body. On the one hand, this somatic nonduality is a primordial truth. But on the other, unifying body and mind is a *practice*. In other words, it is a truth that needs to be realized.

In fact, this is exactly what we have been practicing on this journey together in this book. This oneness of the bodymind—this sense of internal nonduality—is what happens gradually along the path of waking down. The many techniques of surrendering to the body’s wisdom gradually allow the

mind to relinquish control. Only then does the oneness of the bodymind emerge as a full experience.

One of the most important ways of realizing oneness of the bodymind is through mastery. When we hear the word *mastery*, we might think of intellectual prowess, but mastery in Asian cultures is aligned with arts of the body, such as physical yoga, martial arts, and dance. My Tibetan yoga teacher used to talk a lot about mastery, using the Tibetan word *shinjang*, or *praśrabdhi* in Sanskrit. You may remember that word from chapter 5, where I discussed its meaning as “suppleness.” This word has two valences that are connected: one is malleability and suppleness; the other is mastery or “thorough training.” To master is to become supple.

Mastery can be cultivated in any physical sport or art (basketball, rock climbing, dance, martial arts, you name it!), but my own experience of it is in Tibetan yoga, so I will refer to that here. To get to the level of mastery in yoga, you first have to go through many hours of practice. Without putting the time in, mastery is not possible.

You start with learning and memorizing the techniques and movements. Then you move on to repetition. You have to do your activity again and again—not dozens of times but hundreds of times. This results in a deeper muscular, mental, and neurological learning. In the process of repetition, something happens that we might call “coordination”—the mind, breath, and body start to work together instead of being slightly at odds.

In some yoga postures, for example, you have to pay a lot of attention to balance. How you hold your body’s weight on your foot makes all the difference when you have only an inch of surface area to work with. Your body and mind have to merge to make that happen. The activity demands it.

Then you reach the tipping point. This is a profound shift that is familiar to people in many arenas: climbers, dancers, martial artists, basketball players, tennis players, and others whose activities require physical skill and refinement. At the tipping point, your sense of effort dissolves. Suddenly the body takes over and is moving you. This moment is unmistakable. Even the sense of self dissolves. There is no mover. There is nothing but motion.

On the other side of the tipping point, there is an inner experience of complete freedom and ecstasy. Body and mind dissolve into a unified flow. Suppleness is present as an ability to incorporate any surprising conditions into the flow. The unexpected is enfolded into the unity because the bodymind is also no longer separate from its environment. This is the experience of mastery.

PRACTICE

Be the Doing

You might think that you are not capable of mastery. But everyone is. It takes a willingness to show up. Yoga, dance, even walking—these can be places to experience mastery.

It begins with getting in touch with how it feels to become your activity. Becoming the doing helps the barrier between mind and body begin to dissolve. This sets you up to taste mastery before you have mastered.

Take this practice into a movement activity. Start with something as simple as taking a walk. As you move, see if you can drop the idea of “me moving” and become the flow of movement. This starts with surrendering to the sensations your body feels as you move and staying with the motion. Now, as you move, think, *While walking, no walker*. Be the walking.

You can come up with your own internal instructions based on your sport or activity, such as:

While running, no runner.

Be the running.

While saluting, no yogi.

Be the salutation.

While swimming, no swimmer.

Be the swimming.

Flow

The synchronization of prāṇa and mind happens in unexpected moments. Sometimes it has to do with concentration. Such synchronization eventually results in a settling of everything into a sense of stillness. While this stillness is devoid of agitation, it is not devoid of movement.

Prāṇa-mind union is a flow state. In a flow state, there is a sense of stillness because we are not agitated. But things are flowing.

Even when you sit perfectly still, breath is flowing in and out of your lungs. Blood is flowing through your veins. Sounds are flowing around you. Thoughts and feelings are flowing. Memories and images are flowing. A kaleidoscope of experience is unfolding in the settled state.

This synchronization of prāṇa and mind resulting in a settled state *might* happen while you are meditating, but it is not necessarily so. It can happen while your body is in motion.

Wakefulness is not a full stop. To awaken is to enter into intimacy with flow.

At first it seems as if things are flowing around us. But then we notice how it is not as we thought. The world is not flowing by. We are flowing. The self is a flow.

There is a substrate to life's flow. That substrate is prāṇa, or more accurately the wind-mind, circulating all throughout our body. Our karma and history ride the winds of prāṇa. Wisdom also rides the winds of prāṇa. Wind-mind, its quality and nature, not only impacts our health and well-being but also radically influences how we perceive our entire reality.

Understanding yourself as a flow is liberating and humbling. Our entire lives are spent shoring up this notion of a self, with little to show for it. Flow has no rigid boundaries. Nothing is fixed.

It is a relief to be undefined.

Understanding others as flows can open the door to real compassion. Friends, enemies, strangers—these categories lose their meaning. In their true nature, others are sacred mysteries. They are in flux, even if it is not immediately perceptible.

In terms of practice, somatic mindfulness is a path of bringing attention into inseparable union with flow.

Flow leads to intimacy. First, we notice the flow. Then we follow the flow. Then we dance with flow. Finally, we dissolve into flow. We become most intimate with it.

PRACTICE

Flow Meditation

Begin with three cleansing breaths. (See [this page](#) for a refresher on this practice.)

Now follow the flow of your natural breath. Ride the inhale and exhale for a few breaths.

Notice the flow of blood through your veins.

Notice the flow of sensory experience; how sounds in your environment hum and percuss, how the air and wind flow against your skin.

Open your eyes a little and notice the flow of the visual field. Even if things seem still, if you gaze for a while, you will notice subtle swirling and pulsing.

Notice the flow of thought, how one thought gives way to the next, like leaves floating downstream on the surface of a river.

Now turn your attention to your body's subtle energy, the prāṇa. Immerse yourself in the feeling of your body's all-over aliveness.

Can you feel how energy too is flowing?

Can you become one with it?

Rest with your mind dissolved in prāṇa, your body's energy, for as long as you can.

Returning to GROUND

At the end of the day, many of us do not have a lot of time to devote to formal sitting practice. But that should not keep us from practicing. There was a community of early Buddhist contemplatives in India who enacted meditation through their trades. This community, called the eighty-four mahāsiddhas, meditated while in the midst of their professions: studying, farming, cleaning, grinding sesame seeds, and so forth. This cohort is a good model for how we too can learn to practice in the midst of our human life, no matter what we are doing.

The mnemonic of GROUND captures the essence of a circular pilgrimage, one that begins by grounding in the body and ends with dissolving the separation between body and mind. In between, there is intimacy with body, breath, energy, and consciousness. While this mnemonic provided a framework for the entire journey of embodied awakening, it also provides a reminder for a simple but powerful practice that can be quickly enacted on the spot, whether it be your office, in a hospital hallway, on a park bench, or on a mountaintop. Yes, it is true your

office and a mountaintop are very different environments, but that is the point. You can enact GROUND anytime, anywhere.

PRACTICE

GROUND

At first, try this practice standing, with your hands at your sides. Spend at least one minute with each of the six instructions, before moving on to the next. Over time, you can enact all six instructions in a shorter time frame, as a practice that you do on the spot in daily life.

Earth Body

Ground: Allow attention to be drawn to your body's natural earthiness and groundedness. If you are standing, let attention go toward your feet. If you are seated or lying down, let your attention go to wherever your body meets the earth. Be in your physical body.

Relax: Notice where tension is held in your body and release it. Invite a few slow, deep breaths into your belly, shoulders, arms, face—wherever you are holding tension. With every exhale, release.

Subtle Body

Open: Feel your posture lengthen, your shoulders relax, and your chest open. Starting with your heart area, feel your body and senses open up. Open your ears, nose, eyes, mouth, heart, and mind. Be in your subtle body.

Untangle: Scan your body and mind. What residue of feeling is present in your subtle body? What anxiety, sadness, loneliness, apathy, ruminations are present? Whatever you encounter in yourself, notice where it lives in your body. Make room for it with kindness. Befriend.

Body of Truth

Nurture: Allow your attention to move your eyes. Raise your gaze and widen your field of vision, keeping your gaze soft. Relax completely and let your mind expand outward infinitely. Be effortless. Nurture your relationship with awareness. Be in the body of truth.

Dissolve: Finally, relax all effort and let all practices just melt into space. Stop trying to do anything at all. Allow the separation between mind and body, mind and prāṇa, self and world dissolve. Dwell in the great oneness beyond description and beyond thought.

This practice of GROUND is simple but powerful. Play with the length of time you spend on each step. Sometimes take the practice onto your cushion (as a formal meditation practice) or use it to begin your yoga practice. Sometimes try it before sleep. Remember GROUND when you are experiencing stress or fear and need a way to move from your ruminating thoughts into your body's natural wisdom field. GROUND will gradually lead you to embody wakefulness in your daily life.

Integration

Sometime after attending a weeklong retreat at Wonderwell Mountain Refuge, a retreat center in New Hampshire where I teach, a woman said to me, “Coming to retreat here was a great experience and it was a relief to have a break from my regular routine, but going home—now *that* was a practice.”

If you have ever done a retreat, you might be familiar with this phenomenon. It often strikes people as unexpected, that integration into daily life *after a retreat* is also a practice. It is one thing to feel yourself transforming. It is quite another thing to sustain what you have learned.

Integration of practice into our daily life turns out to be really important. We are, after all, practicing *for* something. We are practicing to live life gracefully.

We do not want to sequester meditation on a cushion or yoga on our mat. We don’t want to leave practice behind in a certain place in our home. That is not where these trainings should ultimately land.

In the end, life itself must become the practice. When practice starts to bleed into your life, then you encounter the heart of meditation, the heart of mindfulness, the heart of yoga. Its heart is a way of being, a way of meeting life.

I think of this discovery of the relevance of meditation as integration. It is a kind of nonduality, since integration means “to make whole.” In spiritual practice, the word *integration* means the dissolving of separation between life and practice.

Dissolving that separation helps us gradually see that the spiritual path is not a journey to an exotic land beyond sorrow. There is no land beyond sorrow. Sorrow is human. Joy is human.

The journey of waking down is circular. It is taking the long path home to the unity of the bodymind. When we come home, we discover the choice to encounter this being human in a totally new light. We can now embrace the joys and sorrows with much greater intimacy and appreciation.

That very ground that we began with is where we will end. In this book, we started with grounding, followed by relaxing, opening, untangling, nurturing, and dissolving. This too is circular. Dissolving duality is a kind of return to the ground. But this time it is a wide-open, groundless ground.

At the end of the path, the ground is “groundless” because when duality dissolves, there is nothing to hold on to. It turns out that inhabiting the unfixed, undefinable, indescribable space of nonduality has its own kind of stability. That is why it has the feel of returning to the ground.

Conclusion

ON MY LAST visit to Bhutan, I made the trek to Bumdrak with a small group of friends. Bumdrak is a pilgrimage site with a temple that clings to the rock face of a high mountain on one side of the Paro valley. After climbing a long wooden ladder to get through the temple door, my eyes were drawn out the window where a tangle of junipers cascaded down the mountain into an abyss of fog. Above, the sun set over ragged peaks on the other side of the Paro valley.

My friends and I asked the monk caretaker for a tour of the tiny, narrow temple. Opposite the windows was a shrine. After pointing out the various statues, the monk turned to us and said, “But there is also an innermost shrine. Follow me.”

We followed him behind the main shrine and immediately noticed on the back wall of the temple what appeared to be a large, shuttered window. I expected it must have been some kind of reliquary, but he opened the shutters to reveal the dark, naked rock face, draped in *katas* (white silk ritual scarves).

Behind the *katas*, at eye level, the rock’s surface caved slightly inward, a vertical, oblong indent worn smooth by many reverent hands and heads that had touched its surface over the centuries. Smudges of cedarwood and saffron powder decorated its edges.

In my travels throughout the Himalayan region, I had seen handprints and footprints immortalized in rock believed to have been left by past adepts, a testament to their realization. But this stone imprint looked different, larger.

“A footprint?” I asked tentatively.

“No, not exactly. This is where Yeshe Tsogyal and her partner Guru Rinpoche landed after flying up from Tiger’s Nest. It is an imprint where their entwined bodies hit the rock.”

A body-print. Looking at the indent, I saw it. The head, the neck, the torso.

I leaned forward and rested my head and then my cheeks on the cold, smooth, damp stone and imagined the bodies of these two adepts—the mother and father of Buddhism in the Himalayas—soaring through space, luminous like rainbows, blissful, tumbling against the mountain.

Standing upright again, the reverie faded, and I noticed my own body. It was shivering slightly as the sun dipped below the peaks. My knees ached from a day of trekking. My eyes were bleary from high-altitude insomnia. But deep in my torso, I felt a tingling warmth and a deep sense of being suddenly present and grateful, perhaps a blessing from the body-print.

I marveled at the message encoded in this prehistoric stone, at the power of these ancient human bodies to speak beyond the grave without a single word. I wondered if they were trying to remind future generations that it is not enough to understand, to know. In the end, there is nothing but this: the traces not just that we lived but of how we lived, how we loved, and what we embodied.

As my friends and I climbed down the stairs from the temple, the monk leaned out the open window and smiled at us, calling out “Kuzuzangpo!” This is a phrase used as a greeting in Bhutan, but it is not often used in partings, so it startled me for a moment.

Kuzuzangpo. *Is your body well?* I stopped for a moment and thought about it. Yes, this body, weary travel worn and ultimately mortal as it is, is well. It is well indeed.

Appendix: Four Types of Yogic Breathing

1. Three Cleansing Breaths

You can begin any meditation session with three cleansing breaths. Start by inhaling slowly and deeply.

Now exhale slowly, deeply, and fully through both nose and mouth. To extend the breath, pull back on the root of your tongue. You will notice your breath sounds like the ocean surf heard from a distance.

Toward the end of your exhale, engage your lower abdominal muscles until you have exhaled every last drop of air from your lungs.

Now repeat this breath cycle two more times.

On each exhale, imagine that you are clearing out blockages impeding the flow of energy through your body. These blockages are physical, mental, and emotional.

On each inhale, imagine that you are taking in clean, bright air to nourish your body.

At the end of the third cleansing breath, return to your natural breath.

2. The Gentle Breath (jamlung)

Gentle breathing is “natural prāṇāyāma,” or natural breath practice. In one way, gentle breathing is already happening. We have a natural resting breath, or our breath when we are not in a state of physical exertion.

In our daily life, however, there is more than one kind of resting breath. Our breath is very closely connected to what we are thinking and feeling. We often hold our breath; or our breath is erratic, in line with the

restlessness of the thinking mind. We don't even notice how erratic our breath is most of the time.

When the mind is relaxed and settled, however, the breath becomes gentle and even. This rhythmic, even breath that happens naturally when our mind settles down is gentle breathing. In gentle breathing practice, the key is not to change your breathing but rather to notice your breathing. Allow the breath to breathe you.

When you pay attention to your breathing, in a light and relaxed way, your mind and body gradually settle down into stillness. The breath then begins to find its own natural rhythm. You do not need to force it. When you let go and relax, gentle breathing happens.

This sets up a feedback loop. As your mind notices the gentle breathing set in, your mind is soothed by the breathing. As your mind becomes soothed, the breath further gentles.

Practicing gentle breathing is catalyzed by a simple act of allowing your restless energy to settle out. There are many ways this might happen. But one tool to allow this to happen is to turn your attention to the breath, without trying to control the breath.

Paying attention to the breath but not trying to control it is easier said than done. We tend to micromanage our experience, sometimes in very subtle ways.

When meditating on the breath, we might grasp at or tighten around the breath and that causes the breath to become uneven. Or we might have doubts floating through our mind: *Am I doing it right? Am I breathing too deeply? Is my breath too shallow?* We become self-conscious. This is a common situation for meditators, a part of the self-consciousness syndrome mentioned in chapter 1.

The remedy for this meditative self-consciousness is to loosen your attention and to surrender to your natural breath. At this point, only a part of your mind is noticing the breath, in a relaxed way. The rest of the mind is open and expansive, taking in the panorama of your experience. When we master this loose and relaxed attention, after a while, the breath slows down and becomes even and rhythmic.

Have you ever watched an infant or small child sleep? There is a point in their sleep when the breath becomes gentle and even. This kind of breathing is utterly unselfconscious and natural. This natural unforced breath is gentle breath. The key points of gentle breathing practice are attention to the breath and not contriving or controlling the breath in any way. You are just watching.

3. Mezzo Breathing (barlung)

The next form of prāṇāyāma is mezzo breathing. *Mezzo* means “between” or “middle”—mezzo breathing is between gentle breathing and gentle vase breathing (discussed in the section below). Each inhale and exhale is deeper and longer than your resting breath pattern but not as deep and long as vase breathing.

It is also called “mezzo” in recognition of the way breath acts as a bridge between the body and mind.

Breath is also a bridge between the bodymind and the outside world.

As with gentle breathing, begin by turning your relaxed attention to the breath.

Now, however, you begin to take long, slow, deep breaths. Extend your inhale slightly more than you would normally, and your exhale more completely than you would normally. The inhale and exhale are slow and even, but deeper than usual.

In order to get a feel for mezzo breathing, count to four slowly as you inhale, and count to four slowly as you exhale. This will help you develop a feeling sense of the slow, deep rhythm of mezzo breathing. Once you have done this counting exercise for a few breaths, let go of the counting and stay with the breath as if you were on the surface of the ocean and riding the swells.

When you are doing mezzo breathing, notice how you are being nourished by the air around you. When you extend your inhale and exhale for a period of time, you begin to feel more awake, alive, and conscious—

more wakeful. The mezzo breath is energizing. But you should not do this practice for more than five minutes at a time or so to avoid hyperventilating.

Medium breath practice is beneficial for insomnia. You can engage with this practice while you are falling asleep or when you wake up in the middle of the night.

4. Gentle Vase Breathing (bum chung)

Gentle vase breathing involves a combination of deep breathing and gentle breath holding. Vase breathing is most effective when learned from an experienced teacher, but I want to mention it here for the sake of thoroughness. It is called “vase breathing” to invoke the image of a vase that is wide at the bottom and narrow at the top. When you practice vase breathing, you envision breathing into the vase top (your throat, neck, and chest) and then allowing the air to travel all the way down the torso to your lower belly. You then hold the breath below your navel like you might hold water in the deep, wide part of a vase. Release after about twenty seconds. The point is not to hold your breath for a long time but for just long enough to help your energy settle.

This focus on holding the breath in the lower belly below the navel is what gives vase breathing its power to settle down your nervous system and mind.

Guided Audio Practices

AUDIO RECORDINGS OF the practices introduced in this book are available online for free download at www.Shambhala.com/WakefulBodyPractices.

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Glossary of Sanskrit and Tibetan Terms

All terms in Sanskrit unless otherwise noted.

ābhāsa: Appearance, phenomena, luminosity, radiance.

adhisāra: A yogic physical discipline involving vigorous movement routines, postures, and breathing exercises.

advaya-jñāna (pronounced “ad-vaya jnya-na”): Nondual wisdom.

anātman: Selflessness.

asana: Posture.

barlung (Tibetan): The medium breath (form of prāṇāyāma).

bhāvanā: Meditation, practice, habituation.

bodhi: Awakening, enlightenment.

bodhisattva: One who longs to awaken; an archetype of compassion.

bum chung (Tibetan): Small vase breath (form of prāṇāyāma).

chuba: Traditional Tibetan robe.

dharmakāya: Body of truth, reality itself, limitless dimension of the body-mind.

duḥkha: The dissatisfactory nature of existence.

haṭha yoga: Physical and breathing exercises intended to catalyze awakening.

jamlung (Tibetan): The gentle breath (form of prāṇāyāma).

jingwa (Tibetan): Grace, ease of movement.

kāya: Body.

kāyacitta-abheda: Oneness of the bodymind.

kāye: In/of the body.

lusem yerme (Tibetan): Inseparability of body and mind.

mahāsukha: Great bliss.

maṇḍala: Sacred representation of the universe; circle.

māras: Projections.

nāḍī: Channel, pathway.

naljor (Tibetan): Yoga; joining with the natural state.

nirmāṇakāya: Metamorphic body; physical dimension of embodiment.

prāṇa: Subtle energy, flow, aliveness.

prāṇāyāma: The art of yogic breathing.

praśrabdhi (pronounced “pra-shrab-dī”): Suppleness, malleability, thorough training.

pratītya-samutpāda: Interbeing, interdependence.

prṥthvīmātā: Mother Earth.

rāja yoga: Royal self-cultivation; internal reflection.

rigpa (Tibetan): Fundamental ground awareness.

sādhana: Liturgy, ritual transformation.

śamatha: Tranquility meditation.

saṃbhogakāya: Body of enjoyment; energetic dimension of embodiment.

shinjang (Tibetan): Thorough training, suppleness, flexibility of body and mind.

shinjin ichinyo (Japanese): Oneness of the body and mind.

smṛti: Mindfulness; that which is remembered.

svabhāvikakāya: Essence body, integrative dimension of embodiment.

thangka (Tibetan): Sacred painting.

trulkhor (Tibetan): Tibetan energy yoga.

uma (Tibetan): The subtle central channel that runs the length of the spine; mother channel.

vāyu: Subtle energy, wind.

yoga: The art of joining with the natural state; spiritual practice.

yogi/yogini: A practitioner of yoga.

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- [17.](#) Ari Goldfield, unpublished translation from Milarepa's Song "Six Words That Sum It All Up."
- [18.](#) Hirshfield, *Women in Praise of the Sacred*, 47.
- [19.](#) Albert Newen, Leon De Bruin, and Shaun Gallagher, eds., introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
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